

# The Illusory nature of experience

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## Excerpts:

Emptiness doesn't mean there is nothing there, it means that we exist in a world of appearances which arise as experience — no entities are involved.

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The body is a dynamic site of participation in the environment which is, itself, a dynamic unfolding.

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All that I know myself to be is the content of the mind — patterns of experience and interpretation.

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Due to attachment we link one thing to another and then another and another; yet everything in here has a space, its own space, and in its own space it's settled and yet it's sharing the space.

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The one who gets angry or sad is the radiance of the openness spiralling into itself and creating the illusion of an entrapped world – which then releases itself.

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Time is not a possession that we own but we ourselves are always in the very centre of each moment as it unfolds.

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The control that the ego has in the world is basically a kind of violence – it's the violence of tearing asunder the integration of the non-dual field.

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Imagination is the creative capacity of the mind to enter into experience.

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All you can get in any situation is the experience of being there. No experience, whether good or bad, can define who you are – unless you live entirely in the narrative.

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## Perspective...

This weekend we have some time to look at the nature of experience in accordance with the dzogchen tradition. The field of Tibetan Buddhism is very large and there are many different ways of presenting the teachings. Traditionally this is not seen as a problem because we are trying to understand ourselves and if we take a fixed view and look intently from that position then we're likely to get an intense illumination of only certain aspects. So it's very useful to look in different ways, walking around ourselves and looking in the way that we might appreciate a piece of sculpture – using different vantage points to illuminate different things about our condition. It's not so much about looking for the truth or falsity of a particular dogmatic position but more about trying to be in touch with our own existence and through that to see what we are up to – how exactly is it that we go about being sometimes more open and sometimes more closed?

The basic notion is that the ground of our being is actually an openness; the basis of our existence, who we actually are, or the nature of our mind, is an openness which is both uncatchable and indefinable. We are not a thing, we are alive, and that aliveness is experienced by us as a ceaseless flow of events.

Many things are happening to us, that's how we know that we are alive; the central area of enquiry is who are we? To whom are these ceaseless events happening? So we try to catch the moment of our subjectivity as it arises and experience ourselves in the moment of having experiences. In catching what it's like to be present here just now in the moment as it unfolds, we start to see that the one who has that experience is not a thing.

At the heart of our being is an open spaciousness which has enormous potential to manifest in many different ways. We know this because we have already been many different people at different stages of our lives. We have all been happy or sad, youthful and full of energy or, as we get older, having less energy, sometimes with pain and sometimes without. Whether healthy or sick we've had different kinds of sensations and emotions and so many different kinds of thoughts – hopes, fears, aspirations and so on. All of these

have been 'ourselves' at one time, as we have identified with this flow of experience.

Clearly we have a capacity to manifest in many different ways but because we are just chugging along in our lives, trying to hold it all together, the richness of this capacity often remains an unexplored potential. There are so many different things to do – taking care of the family or work, remembering to do something in the garden and so on – that for much of the time we stand in relation to ourselves through the medium of anxiety. 'There are so many demands coming at me!' 'I've got to get it done!' but if we tilt that view slightly we can notice the many different ways in which we manifest during the course of the day. As we are called into being by different situations so our multifarious potential is allowed to unfold in many different ways. This is something quite amazing, and the heart of buddhism is really just to recognise that.

### Impermanent external foundations...

The foundation for this idea is impermanence. If we try to hold onto our life and keep it safe – building up structures inside which we can sit and know what's going on – then the fact of impermanence can be very troubling. We can feel that all that we've tried to do in building ourselves up and making our world safe is under attack.

For example, the mental health department in which I work is facing many financial cuts. It is likely that the unit in which I work will be closed down and we will have to go and work somewhere else. This brings a lot of turmoil because a workplace is not just somewhere where you sit and do what you have to do, there is also an identification – a sense that 'this is my world'. But if the employer who has power over me tells me that I have to go somewhere else then my world will be wherever I am sent. The fact that I have no entitlement whatsoever to say 'this is my world' doesn't feel very nice; it's much nicer to think 'I can live life on my terms, this is where I feel at ease, this is where I know what's going on.' So when this feels under attack it is very disturbing – I'm thinking 'why am I not been allowed to continue to have the life I know I should have?' But why should I be allowed to have this kind of life? If I say 'Well, because it's good and it makes me feel good!' I have to see that these two aspects of life are of no interest at all to middle

management in the N.H.S. – they are not there to maintain my happiness nor to support me in my notion of what is good practice.

So what happens is that, when life goes on reasonably undisturbed for a while, a bubble is set up. We develop a notion that 'This is it; this is my life; this is good! I know where I am and I know what I'm doing.' Then suddenly a wind blows – it could be the wind of international finance, of unemployment or sickness – and some other kind of world moves across ours and flattens off many of the things that we believed were permanent. We had become used to these things, and they seem valid in themselves, so we can't imagine why anyone would want to change them.

When we have that sort of thought, which I think is very usual, we are actually inside a set of blinkers and we're seeing a particular frame of reference in which we have little sense of the variables. In fact our little worlds or systems are niched inside much bigger systems so movements far away can suddenly bring big changes to our situation.

### Impermanent internal foundations...

On the level of identification, where we believe we know what's what, these changes can be very alarming. However if we attend to how our life actually is, if we attend to the phenomenology of existence – to how we reveal ourselves moment by moment – we find that we are always changing. So there is something strange here because I'm always changing and yet I'm frightened of change. There is quite a difference between when I'm performing the changes, a situation that can feel quite validating, and when it feels like the change is coming at me, which feels more like an attack.

Why is it that it feels like an attack when actually I am able to respond in many different ways? Actually there is a deliciousness in that facility of response. It's only in the moment that we manifest them that we can see these different aspects of ourselves, and we can only manifest them if we have new situations. If life is the same every day then we are just making use of a rather narrow band of our total spectrum of possibilities.

Experiencing this new invitation as 'a demand which feels threatening' shows the power of attachment. From a Buddhist point of view attachment is seen

as a very powerful and potentially dangerous phenomenon. It is the attempt to maintain the present in terms of the past – as it was before, so it should be now, and into the future. With attachment we try to stabilise the aspects of experience as a way of reassuring our sense of who we are, and also we hold onto things as a way of making ourselves feel safe. Being open into the flow of experience is likely to make us feel less good – so this is the point where meditation can be useful.

Meditation is a way of spending time with our mind so that we can start to see more precisely the shift between being relaxed and open – accepting the flow of what is happening – and closing down and trying to control the nature of our experience.

Sometimes we are willing to welcome new things. Arriving in a place like this is a nice experience; there is a kind of warmth and wholeheartedness that goes with greeting people. However at a certain point we might feel we've had enough and want to consolidate and go back into our own little place. I would suggest that we are in continuous movement between these two polarities and we will only get to see how this comes about by observing our own mind in action. We want to look to see 'What is the nature of the opening and what is the nature of the closing?'

### Assumption and recognition...

We're going to be focusing on the topic of illusion. This is a very important idea in buddhist thought and also in many schools of hindu thought. To say that the world is illusory does not mean that the world is some kind of fantasy but rather that we assume that all phenomena – the world, our experience, these streets in Macclesfield, each other – are constituted in ways in which they are not. That is to say, when we see people, or this building, or the cars outside and so on, we imagine that there are truly existing phenomena – that a car is simply 'a car', that a house is just 'a house', and that each of us is 'ourselves'.

For example, when we see someone we haven't seen for a while, as soon as we see their posture or the shape of their hair, we recognise them – we know that they are that person. On one level this is true, there is a continuity of pattern which allows an identification – our lives would be impossible if we

couldn't recognise common phenomena. However what would be seen as erroneous from a buddhist standpoint is the assumption that the continuity of recognition – which is our capacity to see things as being the same – is arising on the basis of the object having some 'true' internal definition.

So we might say to this person 'how are you?' This is a very interesting question because it carries with it the implicit possibility that the other person is not the same as they were when we last saw them. Generally speaking, of course they are not the same. If we haven't met for six months or a year then many many things will have happened to them.

So now we come to the cusp, or fulcrum point – do we go with the sameness or do we go with the freshness? In thinking that we know roughly who people are, or how this building works, or that we know a little bit about streets of Macclesfield, the continuity of the possibility of recognition gives us a sense of prediction. It carries with it a sense of being an intelligent conscious agent with a sense of individual autonomy and power. With this overarching or meta-view, I feel that I can live life on my terms; that I know what's what. But so many things change in people's lives and in our surroundings – things we may know nothing about; the detail is always changing.

So I could say 'I've come back to Macclesfield' but, although this place is called Macclesfield, since I was last here there have been lots of different Macclesfields. It has been through many changes in terms of climate, who is on the streets, which buildings are occupied and by whom, whether the population is happy or sad, how many new babies have been born, how many new people have gone into the cemetery. All this 'Macclesfielding' of Macclesfield is hidden when we stay 'I'm back in Macclesfield, it's nice to be here.'

From the buddhist point of view this is very important because it shows how the assumptive power, this grasping at the world, wraps the vibrant quality of presentation of what's going on. It obscures the actuality of being alive and experiencing this particular day in Macclesfield, with this particular quality of dampness in the air and this particular colouration of the clouds. This is it! This is what we have; we have no idea what will happen this afternoon, we

could all be dead by then! Certainly if we were living in Afghanistan a bomb could go off and we'd all be dead.

So at this moment we have a unique specific experience of being here together. As we look around the room we see many things, there is a lot going on; just to describe all these people would take a very long time. However if someone were to ask us about this weekend we might say 'there were quite a lot of people there.' Everybody is subsumed into 'quite a lot of people' yet each of us is unique in our posture, our clothing, in the particularities which are the expression of our being – a being which is unrepeatable. We are never going to be at this moment again; it's impossible, time is moving on. We won't be sitting in this way, we won't be with this particular pattern of sensation, thought, feeling, posture, gesture – this is a one-off...then there's another one-off, and another...and yet we have the continuity.

If we stay with the freshness of the unfolding experience then the quality of contact with the complexity of the field brings us into a place of responsiveness where, because what is here cannot be 'known', we respond directly to what is present. If, on the other hand, we stay with our familiar conceptualisation of 'I know where I am, I've met some of the people here before' then, on the basis of that habitual interpretation and assumption, we can feel empowered to act. In the Taoist system these two modes approximate to the families of yin and yang.

## Yin and yang

Yang is the way in which form comes into the world, manifesting shape, agency and particularised movement. Our culture is very orientated towards yang and most of us have been leading lives which are mainly on the yang side. We are driven by the need to achieve things and to have something to say about ourselves, and if we are not able to define our existence then we can often feel quite troubled. Yin is the more receptive field of awareness which registers the infinite complexity of occurrence. These two have to be balanced; if they are split apart there is a disjunction in the kind of lives that we are leading.

The meditation we will come to shortly is designed to bring about a kind of rebalancing which allows us a more conscious awareness of the openness of our being and a re-grounding into this open dimension. It can bring about a reintegration into the unformed-ness which is at the heart of all the forms we take up.

Without this integration we're always on the level of form trapped in with other forms, and as forms encounter other forms there is friction. This force resists the movement of form on form and generates heat, and wear and tear. I think most of us have experienced a fair degree of wear and tear in our existences, it has not all been easy! One reason for this is that there is a lot of shit about, but there is also the matter of how we position ourselves in relation to the form.

If we take the moment by moment manifestations as being very important and we have the sense that we should be in charge of our lives, then we are forever condemned to trying to impose our will on a shifting situation. Life is so complex that we can be blown off course very easily and the struggle to engage, to make a mark, to organise, to plan, to manage, leads us into conflict with the actual movement of the flow of experience.

### Staying in time...

Of course there are many things that have to be done: you've got to get the tax return in on time, you've got to get the kids to school, there's shopping to be done and so on. These activities can often be carried out with the sense that the world is coming at us and making lots of demands and so our compliance carries a feeling tone of resistance – 'why should I have to, I don't want to' – and this acts as a kind of glue. Perhaps initially there is something to do which isn't all that difficult – if I did it it would just be another thing that has happened and it would go by. However, if I don't want to do it then I think about it and put it off — but at the same time I know it's there. So effectively I am sticking myself onto this 'thing' which is now oppressing me. This brings about extra wearing tear because, in my resistance to the necessity of doing this task, I'm stepping out of time. When I think 'I don't want to do this because it will spoil me as I am now, so I'll do it later' then the moment when it could be done easily and quickly has been displaced into the future. And, as the task is moved into the future, I also am

being hooked into the future – a future which is now filling up with things that I have to do but don't really want to do. So although it seems like a good idea to ring fence the present to avoid being oppressed it doesn't really work. In fact it is a way of building quite a bit of dread into your life because now the enemy is just over the hill and getting closer! So it is easiest to do things if they feel easy. The way to stay in time is not to make too much at stake in whatever we do.

## Equanimity...

In the general writings of Buddhism and dzogchen there is much about the nature of equanimity, about having a balanced attitude toward experience. With equanimity we try to hold the same degree of openness to the people we might think of as enemies as we do to those we think of as friends. How can we treat the people we might not want to be close to with the same degree of openness to those we like to be close to? How can we do this when there are people that we like and people that we don't like?

The key to this is to realise that liking and not liking is our way of 'making special'. When we do this it's like taking a piece of paper and pushing the sides together so the paper starts to contour and bends up in the middle. The pressure causes the appearance of high and low areas on a surface which was originally flat. In a similar way we constantly contour the world – making some things special and others not. We like or dislike certain foods, certain clothes, certain programs on the television; essentially we try to take in the things we like and push away the things that we don't like. These choices are our attempt to customise the world and make it, as far as possible, fit our terms.

This customisation requires a lot of effort because the world is constantly re-contouring itself around us. I tend to buy three of the same shirt as soon as I find a style I like because often, when you go back to the shop to buy another one, you find they don't sell it anymore. This vanishing of possibilities in the world mean that I have to try something new. But I don't want something new and this 'I don't want it' has a little echo of being three years old. It is very easy to enter into a temper tantrum about our existence – 'It's not fair!'... *absolutely correct, it's not fair...* 'But I want it to be fair'...

*tough shit, it's not fair.* 'Well that's dreadful! I think the Prime Minister should be involved!'

It is shocking to realise that the world is not fair but we only really become adults when we realise this and come to terms with its implications. There is a hospital in every town and some of the people in the hospital will be dying just now. It is shocking to realise that some of the people who are dying will be children, however the shock can be helpful in waking us up to the sense that it's not all 'Happy Families'; to see that it's not automatic that you're born, have a good life and then, when you're old and tired, you die. Many different winds can blow across our lives moving them in different directions; the world is unpredictable. If we really open ourselves to this it is shocking and terrifying; we don't want it to be this way.

### Dealing with existential angst...

How can we deal with the existential anxiety this creates? Well, we can reassert control! In order to control things we have to know what they are and we live in a time of information technology which gives people infinite amounts of basic knowledge about things in the world. When you know 'about things' then you feel you can act on them, you can exert your will and make them do what you want. However the knowledge that we have about something is always out of date.

If you read a restaurant guide the chef may well have changed since the review was written. If you're thinking of a holiday you can read a guidebook to help you choose a nice hotel but when you get to the hotel it could be terrible. The notes about it were made six months ago and maybe since then the owner has died and someone else has taken over. So your guidebook told you something very accurate about the past, but you didn't buy it for history you bought it for the future. This is something a guidebook cannot tell you; in fact a guidebook tells you about a past that you can't go to. You can't go to 'Lanzarote last year' because that has gone; you can go to 'Lanzarote this year' but nobody knows about that. People are endlessly obsessed with googling this, googling that, and getting excited about what they find out, but the information gets out of date.

So if knowledge and information are always approximations with a fairly high percentage of inbuilt error how should we proceed? This is the point where we have to move out of a largely cognitive domain, a domain of purely mental activity, and come into the body. The body with its senses gives us a huge amount of real-time information about what is going on. It tells you where it is living now, whether the air smells good or not, whether the seat is comfortable or not and this is not theory. Our cognitions can do theory and speculate about this and that, but our bum is telling us directly whether or not the seat is comfortable. So this is about being open to the aspects of our existence – sensations, the information coming in through our ears, nose, eyes and so on, but also to memories, fantasies and plans for the future.

If we only rely on one particular modality we will get the reading of just that modality and inside that we will have our particular prejudices, liking some kinds of smells, tastes and so on. But by holding the widest range of potential information, and allowing the uninterrupted interaction of these modalities, we get a rounded picture – just as you would by walking around a sculpture – and the more we open ourselves to the fullness of experience the more rounded the picture we get. This rounded picture shows us the changing movement of what is occurring.

### Illusion...

In the Buddhist tradition this changing nature is generally referred to as illusion. This means that something appears to be the case although it is not; that there is a 'thereness' to an experience but no substance behind it or under it, so it's like a rainbow in the sky.

When we see a rainbow we see something which is there, but it appears due to causes and conditions. It is a particular juxtaposition of factors that allows you access to the rainbow: the angle of the sunlight relative to the droplets of moisture in the air and includes your own particular positioning – if you were in another part of the valley you might not see the rainbow. It's the same with a mirage. If you're driving on a hot summer day you sometimes see a shimmering water-like image on the road in front of you. It looks like water and you say 'Oh it's water!' but as the car moves to the place where you think you will find the water there is none to be found; so it is 'as if' something is there, but it is not. Another example is of the reflection of the

moon on water – on a still pond, on a beautiful full moon night, you can see a wonderful radiant white form which looks like the moon. The details are there in the reflection and yet if you put your hand in the water and disturb the surface you find it's both there and not there. It's illusory nature doesn't mean there's nothing there but it means that there is not something truly there.

These images are used to give a sense of non-duality: to illustrate that all that we see, all that we experience, has an actuality which is ungraspable. There is a performativity to experience – something is being enacted, performed, displayed, unfolded – but it has no solidity.

### A 'statuesque' illusion...

We can use this piece of metal beside me as an example of this. If we look at it we might say 'this is Padmasambhava' or if you didn't know the name 'this is a statue', but if you're a scrap-metal dealer you might say 'I'll come back at midnight!' When the Chinese went into Tibet they saw many statues like this and they hit them with hammers, then they took them away and melted them down and used them to make weapons and so on. So how we relate to this depends on what we can put onto; what we see as 'out there' is not out there, it is a relationship between what's in here and what's out there. Whatever something is for us, it is a co-emergence – partly from the subject side and partly from the object side. It appears to be 'out there' because, if you know a bit about these statues you immediately think 'this is Padmasambhava, he's making a particular *mudra* which means this and that'. So a whole story can unfold and it's as if that whole story is embedded in the object, but it's not in the object – the story is evoked from within us by what is in the perceptual field.

In that way we see that what we call 'subject' and what we call 'object' are not two separate domains but are linked and co-emergent, they cannot be separated as 'things'. There isn't a real object out there and there isn't a real subject inside. What we have is a potential in the domain which we call the object, or the field of experience, and there is a potential in the subject. Both potentials come together as the unfolding of our own unique specific experience.

I was brought up in the protestant tradition in Scotland so we had no statues at all in our church. When I first encountered buddhist statues in India I thought 'John Knox would not be in favour of this. There was a time when you would get whipped for this, and if you take that attitude back three hundred years and you would be burned in the village square!' However if you have a catholic background and grow up going to a church with statues of the virgin Mary and statues of saints, you have a very different experience. You are used to the idea that you can have an embodied representation which is, in some ways, the actuality of what it represents.

So you can see that the story line, or the habitual orientations that we have, is part of what we bring to the encounter. We cannot actually get to the object itself because all objects are interpreted. This interpretation also depends on our mood and because moods shift we cannot necessarily know what our interpretation is going to be. So we might buy a painting and have it on our wall for some years but one day we look at it and think 'I don't like this very much, I don't know why it's here.' This happens because we are fickle. There is a lot to be said for being fickle, if you weren't fickle you wouldn't have anything new. International exchange commodity capitalism depends on the fickleness of the consumer, without it you would stop buying. Governments are encouraging us to buy our way out of the recession, to be more fickle, be distracted, be unreliable and impulsive – Bankrupt yourself and save the nation!

So when we look at the statue it's very interesting to really try to see that you are telling the statue what it is. If we showed it to a three month old baby, as far as we know from laboratory research, it wouldn't be able to make any sense of it because it doesn't have a story line. All it would have is a sense of colours and shapes which won't be coherent. As we get older parents and big people around us give us story lines about what's going on – 'this is Mickey Mouse', 'this is a drawing of a horse', 'this is the time to clean your teeth' – and in this way we build up more and more stories. These stories seem to tell the truth about what is there and so we come to live inside our stories as if they give us a reliable account of what's there.

However stories cannot have any real substance to them because they have to be repeated, reiterated again and again, to have their force. This is shown by the big stories coming up for the Olympic games and the Queen's

sixtieth Jubilee. Many many stories will be told about these events and their history and new images are created as a way of reminding people about the past. So the importance of the present is established on the past as it moves into the future. These are all story-lines and whether you are a royalist or a republican you'll have to position yourself in some way with regard to them.

So going back to this object...what is it? Is there something here that we can all agree upon? Perhaps that it's made of metal; so is metal something you can rely on as a fundamental basis for existence? What *is* metal? Well, we can do a bit of chemistry at school and learn some of the basic elements whose juxtaposition and merging into compounds is part of the creation of what we call 'the metals' which constitute this sculpture. However, when these elements are themselves examined through different stories, different things are revealed.

Generally at school you start with the Rutherford atom, a simple kind of account. Then as you go up the school and maybe do a bit of physics and mathematics you learn about different kinds of nuclear particles, sub-nuclear particles, and so on there is more and more sense of an infinite regress. A sense that you never get to the bottom of things, that there is no fixed basic substance such that when we get to it we will 'know where we are and what's what.' Instead you get into a dynamic field of interaction of aspects of potential or energy which are fairly unpredictable and yet somehow, even with that ungraspability, manage to generate things that we can call 'a statue' or 'a can of baked beans.' So, as all phenomena are generated out of movements which are unpredictable, what we actually have is a very elaborate sequencing of factors coming together to generate what you might call epiphenomena, or surface phenomena which are held in place by our story. So when we look at the statue we are looking at a site of stories.

Perhaps you are thinking that you could get a little knife and scrape off some of the metal and have this analysed in a laboratory and then you would have 'the truth', but actually it would be another story. It would be the story for people interested in chemistry; saying 'Ah yes, I was sure that would be there!' is a response to a story. If somebody is interested in chemistry and knows about the likely components of this kind of metal then that story is singing to them – it's their kind of tune, their kind of story.

You can see that everywhere in life there are things which are interesting and meaningful for us because they are accessible to us through our familiar story lines. When we encounter other people, maybe at a party or social gathering, and we can't think what to say to a person it's because these little invisible antennae – like the ones ants have on the top of their heads – have been rubbing with the other person's antennae and because there's no story transfer we are left wondering what kind of world they live in. They live in a world of different stories and so our stories can't make contact with theirs.

This is at the heart of the meaning of illusion. It doesn't mean that there is nothing here, everything *is* here, but it's here as constant creation, as the revelation of the interplay of subject and object. When you look out to the object you can't find anything definite and when you look into the subject also you can't find anything definite.

### Storylines...

So, in the time that we have available we'll start to look more at the nature of the mind and how the mind is operating in the field of experience. We'll try to get a direct sense of the nature of the creation, or the coming into being of the undeniable presence of what's here.

Look around the room – it's here, we're here, it's not a joke and yet you can't grasp it because when you start to tell a story about it you've created another experience. These experiences chase each other – it's like when you start with a small snowball at the top of a hill and as you roll it down it gets bigger and bigger and bigger. So we have these cumulative stories that we tend to live inside and the function of the meditation is to try to let us see the point of production of the story. The central reason for doing this is not that stories are bad and we should stop them but that if you live inside a story as if it's the truth you have a problem.

For example, in Syria just now there are different kinds of stories running. The government's story is that there are terrorists who are trying to destroy the nation state and so the president is acting on behalf of the good people of the country by sending in the army to crush this vicious rebellion. However there is another story that says 'this is a terrible family dictatorship in which power has been handed on, which crushes the lifeblood of the

people; the country is pervaded by fear and secret police and it's important to fight for freedom.' These are two contesting stories and we see this dynamic operating in many many countries of the world. Which story do we believe?

Seeing the nature of stories is very very important. Story is the creativity of the open dimension of the mind; in buddhist language the enlightened basis of the buddha's mind reveals itself as stories. Stories are how human beings have experiences. As far as we know, cows and slugs don't have stories, they have something else, but once human beings reach the age of two they are really starting to be woven into language. Within language everything that we have is mediated through story lines.

So maybe just before we take a break we can do a little quiet sitting just to allow ourselves to settle and have a bit more space. Sitting with the spine erect, allowing the mind to focus on the movement of the breath through the nostrils or fixing the eye on some mark on the ground in front, we just decide to keep our attention on that simple object and not to attend to whatever other things arise. If you find yourself wandering off, just very gently bring yourself back.

The purpose of this kind of practice is to develop a sense of being calm and clear. By being less caught up in the movement of the mind, and in parallel with that, being able to maintain an intentional focus, gradually the rate of activity in the mind settles down so that we become more calm. Because we're less involved in what's going on, we have a separation out that brings a kind of clarity. So it's a kind of spring cleaning of the mind which then allows us to go into more investigative attention to what's actually going on.

### The nature of suffering...

We can start to move towards looking at the notion of emptiness and maybe we'll start with the traditional view of the three marks of conditioned existence: suffering, impermanence and absence of inherent self-nature.

That 'all compounded things are suffering' is a view which is shared by all buddhist schools but when we see the sunlight coming through the window

or the daffodils starting to come out this doesn't feel too much like suffering, so is this basically a pessimistic view?

Well, the fleeting nature of existence – the transient nature of the phenomena we encounter and our own reactions to them – can be problematic because we can't hang on to the good things that we might want to. For example we are getting used to this balmy weather and people in London are going around in shorts and tee-shirts. However the forecast for next week is that more cold weather is coming and there is a kind of confusion in how to respond to that.

Traditionally this is talked about as the suffering of change. When good things become bad the suffering is obvious but this also refers to when bad things become good. When life gets better we feel more at ease in ourselves, our preoccupation with obsessions and worries and anxieties relaxes a bit and we've often got more space. Perhaps for two or three years you've been so caught up in somebody's state of health and what needed to be done for them that that gave a meaning and purpose to your life. Then that person dies and after a while, when you've come out of that difficult period and the mourning period is worked through, there is suddenly a space. In that space the question arises: 'It's a big world, what will I do with my time?' and that can be quite upsetting.

### The suffering of anxiety

So the talk of suffering refers primarily to the nature of anxiety. In anxiety we have a situation where we're not at ease and we're not at rest. We are discombobulated in some way – not quite integrated. There's a separation of our parts and different aspects of ourselves are a bit in conflict. This feeling of not being home with yourself, of being ill at ease, is the heart of what suffering means.

When we can't settle into ourselves we're not so available through our senses and therefore our interface with the world around us is diminished. So we're getting less accurate information about what's going on in the moment and also we're spending more and more time winding ourselves up around familiar preoccupations. We can clearly see how that takes us into a kind of stupidity because, in that state that of worrying and ruminating and

trying to find a way out, we actually create the labyrinth that we're trapped in.

It's the habitual returning to and ruminating on a problem that creates a lack of perspective. If we just think 'Ok, what will I do?' then there's simply a decision to be made – 'Do I stay or do I go?' 'Do I apply for this post or not?'. Whatever the nature of the situation the actual structure of most problems is fairly straight forward; most problems can be solved quite easily. They may be difficult in themselves, they may evoke lots of emotions, but they are usually not so complicated. Either you're going to go for the operation or you're not. How will you decide? What choices have you got? Yes or no! You can flip a coin or you can put the coin at the bottom of a bottle of whisky and drink down until you've found it again, but one way or another you make a decision. It can be made with tears or with joy, with clarity or confusion, but in the end either you say 'yes' or you say 'no'. If you know that you're going to have to say yes or no, you could take the short path up the mountain and decide in the next minute or you could take the long path and spend a month worrying about it. In the course of that one month of worry, what new depths of insight would be informing your choice – none!

This alienation from existence, where we are not able to act into the moment because there is a kind of deferral – i'm not ripe, i'm not ready, let's wait and see – is really at the heart of suffering. Of course, sometimes 'wait and see' is wise but when it's functioning as an avoidance of the need to make the decision then all we're doing is choosing to spend more time with our anxiety. 'What will happen?' We don't know what will happen. 'How will I know?' You can't possibly know, you just have to do it. 'That's not very rational!' Well the world's not fair and the world's not rational and we have to act without knowing...and this is why these meditative traditions are talking about wisdom rather than rationality.

Rationality is based on getting as much accurate information as possible and taking a critical reading of these potential resources for decision making, then sorting them out and coming to the best tested conclusion that you can. It operates on the assumption that (a) you can get the right information and (b) that you are able to think clearly. Given that we are probably rather confused a lot of the time, rationality is not so wise. Should Iran be

attacked? People in the Pentagon are thinking about this at the moment, Mossad agents are already preparing the ground. Is it a rational decision? From one particular point of view, within certain parameters, with a privileging of certain factors in terms of world politics, it probably does make sense but in terms of many other factors, it doesn't. So if you want to come to a rational conclusion the first thing you have to do is hide half of the evidence! If you are economical with the truth then you can appear completely rational, but the fact is we act into the dark, into 'not knowing', on the basis of cogitation. This reliance on stringing streams of cognition together as if they were the royal road to clarity has been the traditional way of proceeding in the west since the time of Socrates and Plato; it was exemplified in the European enlightenment but it may not be the best way of proceeding.

## Suffering and impermanence

Suffering, as a sense of disorientation, a sense of not being 'all of a piece' in the place where you are, is linked with impermanence. Although clarifying and stabilising your reading of a situation gives you a sense of knowing what's what, the factors holding that situation in place are likely to change. The idea of dependent co-arising or inter-dependent emergence indicates that everything in our world is linked together by small lines or webs of communication and these webs can easily be disturbed.

For example, this building became a buddhist centre through the enthusiasm of many people and one sponsor in particular. At the time of establishing this centre that sponsor was very enthusiastic about buddhism then, after some time, their enthusiasm about buddhism diminished. Some trace of their connection allows some degree of continuity but it's hanging on an increasingly thinner thread. That's an illustration of dependent co-origination. Whether this building will be able to be used in this way in future is uncertain; the fact that it has value, it has function, it's appreciated, is not a sufficient guarantor of its continuity.

Essentially impermanence is the quality of the dynamic flow of experience. Experience is dynamic while conceptualisation – like the search for eternal truths – rests on abstractions and tends to take a view which is outside time. From the point of view of buddhism there are no eternal truths which can be

spoken. Emptiness is an eternal truth but you can't really say anything about it. Whatever comes into this world is going to be in interaction with other aspects of this world and therefore is bound to change. This impermanence, the impossibility of stabilisation, is the main cause of suffering.

### Absence of inherent self nature...

The third factor, *anatta*, or the absence of inherent self-nature, means that whatever we see is a manifestation of field factors and not of an internal essence. So although i can say 'I am James' and there are certain patterns and ways of my being that are recognisable to people that know me, does that mean that there is some 'essence of James' inside me?

We know that if you take a lemon and you squeeze it you get the lemon juice and you could say that 'the juice is the essence of the lemon'. If you take wine and distill it you make brandy and you could say that the brandy is a more essential form of the potential of the wine, and that the wine is a more essential form than the grapes that were on the vine. In each stage of that process you are taking something which has a diffused intensity of flavour and colour and by compressing it and throwing out what is seen as inessential, something more essential is arrived at. From the buddhist point of view we don't have any essence, what we are is a particular constellation of patterning. We have aspects, or ingredients, and these ingredients come together in particular patterns according to our interaction with the environment.

So we are like a kind of kaleidoscope: the events of the world give the kaleidoscope a turn and we show the pattern that arises. If people tell us a happy story and we feel happy it's because their story has just turned the kaleidoscope. Then somebody else tells us a sad story – that somebody is sick or whatever – and the kaleidoscope is turned again and we feel differently. If we are very connected with the sad story then our breathing is going to change, our posture will change, the tone of voice that we have will change, the feelings inside will change, and the kind of thoughts we have will also change. So that interchange caused various aspects of ourselves to come together in a different pattern and in that way we are reconstituted. I would suggest that is a very different model from our ordinary way of thinking about ourselves.

Usually we imagine that we are like a piece of bread; you can put a thousand things onto a bit of bread – butter or margarine, tahini or hummus, marmite or jam. It's as though I'm 'me', a basic substrate like the slice of bread, and sometimes this 'me' feels happy and sometimes it feels sad; and I think that I feel this way because the world has taken a big spoonful of something, dolloped it onto me and spread it on the surface. Then it's as if that layer is there for a while and then it goes, but underneath – 'I'm just me!'

From the buddhist point of view that is a false understanding because there is no fixity to ourselves. What we have is the repetition or reiteration of story-lines by which we speak ourselves into the continuity of ourselves. We do this primarily by relying on the power of the first person singular – 'I'. In our speech we repeat the use of 'I am...', 'I feel...', again and again and every time we use a sentence with 'I', it is as if the 'I' to which we are referring is a stable entity. Then when we say 'I feel tired', 'I feel hungry', 'I feel happy', 'I feel I need to go to the toilet', 'I feel bored' each of these are qualities or experiences that are taken to be happening to 'me'. 'Me' indicates the continuity of this 'thing that I am', a 'thing' which is influenced and touched and, if you like, moulded by events but nonetheless remains the same.

If you imagine a piece of reasonably workable soft moist clay, each time you put your hand onto it the impact leaves a mark. But although the clay distorts itself according to the pressure and the turning of your hand the clay remains the clay. You could keep moving it for half an hour but at the end of that time, although a little bit might be on your fingers, the mass of the clay would be the same as at the beginning. So although the form that the clay is showing has changed, basically the clay is unchanged by these manipulations. I think we often think about ourselves as being like the clay – 'In the course of my life so many things have happened to me. Sometimes I've been like this, sometimes I've been like that and now here I am, still the same old me!' This is not true.

## What is the reality of continuity?

Buddhism would be stupid to say that there is no continuity because we can remember our lives, or certainly bits of it. So there is continuity but this continuity is not the continuity of an essence but of the patterning of the manifesting of our potential. That is to say: due to various circumstances we

have been able to express ourselves in different ways. If you grew up in a household that was a bit strict and controlling and you learned to 'mind your ps and qs' that builds a particular hesitancy into your way of being in the world; there is a kind of anxiety about getting it wrong and that personality trait usually continues quite long into life. If you have grown up into a family where there was a lot of permission to do as you choose that probably will have given you a freedom of exuberant expression and that trait is likely to continue.

Is that particular orientation of your personality arising from something you brought into the world? Well some people who take a very reductive reading of DNA would say that it is – that it's developed out of a particular genetic pattern – but the likelihood of being able to prove this is very very small. Rather we see that there is a potential which has come into a conversation with the mood of the environment and taken on particular patterns of responding according to the causes and conditions of our family, our school and so on. These patterns feel like me, they are me in that this is how I am, how I show myself, how I can be known to other people because this is what I am presenting – yet this apparently 'essential me' was interpersonally formed. It hasn't come up from some kind of seed, like a plant, it's come about through interaction with a particular environment. If we had been born in different families then we would have developed in different ways. This is very important – it's to see that what I take to be essential about myself actually is not essential.

### Psychotherapy and patterning changing...

This is the absolute basis of change in psychotherapy. One of the main forms of resistance to change is the belief that 'I am what I am, this is me.' If somebody strongly has that view it is very difficult to help them because they are convinced – 'How could I be other than myself.'

Most psychotherapies spend some time looking at the development of patterns through childhood experience. So, for example, if you grew up in a very disregulated family, one where the parental influence was chaotic, then it's likely that your behaviour will also become chaotic. Then, as you bring your chaos out into the world, most people will be a bit wary of that so

you'll get quite a lot of rejection and then you feel 'I'm being rejected, nobody likes me, there's something wrong with me. I'm bad!'

The purpose of therapy is to say: this behaviour has arisen due to causes and circumstances, it is not innate, it is not essential; however, as it manifests currently as 'who you are' it is impactful on the environment and elicits a certain kinds of response. You are taking these responses as confirmation that your notion of who you are is definitive. There *is* something wrong with you, but what is wrong is that you're not very good at regulating your behaviour in a social field. The fact that you bang into other people is behavioural, it doesn't speak of any essence at all. However once you put these notions of 'I am a bad person', 'I am un-loveable', 'nobody likes me' into the distillation machine, then drop by drop, this moralised essence creates core negative beliefs and with that a sense of the impossibility of change.

One of the aspects of the absence of inherent self-nature in buddhism is that although there is no defining essence there are patterns which have both continuity and impact. A pattern can be changed, you can diminish its impact, and you can change its trajectory.

Who is the one who can do that? You yourself, and you can only make the change if you believe that 'yourself' is a potential and not an essence. This is the point where we have to stand in relation to ourselves, we have to keep an eye on ourselves; we have to see what we are up to and think 'I'm running the same old story again.'

On the basis of the belief that 'people don't like me' or 'I don't know what to say' or 'I'm socially anxious' or 'I can't dance,' I am making decisions about how close I go to other people or how far away. Because this pattern is being repeated again and again it seems to be true in itself, but it's only true performatively or repetitively – so if I don't keep repeating it, it won't be happening. That's fairly simple...and it is the essential beginning of freedom.

When a little child is picking it's nose, we say 'Please don't do that.' ... "Oh but I have to. There is something stuck...and I like doing it... and I might even eat it!" The child is identified with something because it feels like

'them', just like sucking a thumb. It's easier to spot these things in children because they are very naked in displaying themselves but we all have these patterns on more subtle levels. Patterns of how we like to make our cup of tea, how we like to have a bath – how deep, what temperature the water should be – and so on. This sort of ritualising of existence is a way of confirming 'this is who I am' but in fact what it's confirming is the repetition of a pattern.

## Appearance and dependent co-origination

The flowers in this vase in front of me are arising due to dependent co-origination – so many factors are involved. There are people who produce flowers and they do this because there is a market for them. They are produced under particular conditions, either in a heated greenhouse or imported from a country which is warm enough to allow roses to blossom at this time of year. Nowadays flowers are often imported from Africa and this involves the use of aeroplanes so that is linked with the history of aviation. If cargo flights weren't reasonably cheap you wouldn't be able to have these flowers for sale at a price people are happy to pay and so the price of aviation fuel is also involved. If they come from Africa I would imagine that, because of particular trade links, they are more likely to have been grown in a country which is one of our old colonies rather than in a former French colony. So this brings in the development of markets between African countries and Britain and the nature of exchange agreements and currency exchanges.

So when we look closely into what something is we see that there are many many pathways and tracks of interaction embedded in it. If we take our scissors and cut around the flowers they seem to be self-existing entities – 'lovely roses', but they are only here because of many invisible circumstances and as the manifestation of an incredibly complex series of events. This applies to every kind of phenomenon, whether it's the shape of our body, the amount of education we have, our particular neurotic patterns, our hopes and fears – all of these are patterns which have arisen in relation to the environment; they have no true defining essence within them. The more we see this then the less we see the world as being reliable: things aren't what they appear to be. Yet at the same time we see that things are more amenable to our interaction than we previously thought. When the world

seems fixed it is difficult to know how to participate but if there is a plasticity in the world, if it is movable – something which shifts – then we can participate.

For example when I was a child in Glasgow, the parks had park-keepers who wandered around with whistles. As soon as you walked on the grass or tried to climb a tree they'd blow their whistle and shout at you and you had to leave the park. This was not much fun but their job was to protect the grass; as we know grass is extremely fragile and sensitive and gets very upset when people walk on it!

Probably now you won't find any parks in the whole of Britain where people are not allowed to walk on the grass. Has something changed in the nature of grass? Has it suddenly become more robust, has it developed ego-strength and resilience, has it had psychotherapy?

It's just that at that time a particular social construct was in place and now the grass has been re-framed according to shifts in the culture; what is permissible at one period is not permissible in another. There is no essence in the grass and there is no essence in the function of the park attendant. These things are being defined and re-defined endlessly in the process of the evolution of the culture and so the question arises... 'How shall I behave?' This is a central question and it depends upon the answer to another – 'What can I rely on?'

## Emptiness...

Buddhism generally begins with the taking of refuge; we want to find something reliable to hold onto and the phenomena in the world of samsara are very unreliable – they have no truth to them. The reliability which is to be found in dharma or buddhism is the reliability of emptiness. The buddha is the buddha because he understood emptiness, the dharma is the truth or the path because it speaks of emptiness, and the sangha are useful because they understand something about emptiness.

So what is emptiness? Emptiness means simply that you can't find any essence in anything; everything is empty of essence, empty of internal self-definition.

When we look at these roses, we see yellow roses in a vase. The 'yellowness' of the rose is in the rose but we are saying 'yellow'. The colour yellow will have different connotations for each of us. For some this yellow might feel quite warm whilst for others it might feel quite cold; we will have our own aesthetic response to what is there.

Now we might say 'The roses are there. I quite accept that you are entitled to have your own opinion, your own response to the rose, but that's something which is being projected onto the rose. The rose exists and then you wrap your interpretation around it.' But from the point of view of emptiness this only goes half way, actually there is nothing there. What appears for us is a constructed experience – without our participation there wouldn't be a yellow rose. The yellow rose has a significance that comes into the world, or reveals itself, according to our interaction with it.

In Indian philosophy there is a very old question – 'If a tree falls in a forest and nobody hears it fall, does it make a sound?' Well, if there is no ear to hear then what sound would there be? Without hearing there is no sound because a sound is an experience registered by somebody who hears it.

You can make an assumption, an inference – 'Having heard trees fall, and the thump that they make when they hit the ground, I can infer that that the tree will make a thumping sound when it hits the ground. Therefore yes, it makes a sound.' But that's a mental construction, you can only know if it makes a sound if you hear it.

In the same way, if we close our eyes we don't see what is in the room because the quality of the room that is revealed by our eyes is missing for us. You can say it is there but that is irrelevant, because this room is experience. Each of us has our own unique experience of the room according to where we are sitting, whether in a chair or on the floor, according to whether we have been here before or not, according to our own stories of making sense of environments. So emptiness doesn't mean there is nothing there, it means that we exist in a world of appearances which arise as experience – no entities are involved.

## Looking for an essence...

The mental process of creating entities, of reification, is not just applied to abstractions but it is applied to everything in the world. For example, if you were doing a degree in philosophy, in a section on ethics you might have an essay to write on 'What is love?' There are lots of books you can read about love which will tell you what love is... Aquinas says 'Love is...' so then you can write about love, and talk about love, but where do you find it? What shop sells love, which museum has little exhibits of love so you can go and test whether your concept fits it?

We have the national measurement of the yard and you *can* go to the place where that is kept. So there is a definitive notion of what is a yard but love is not like that. We, with our minds, talk of love as if it's a motor car or an orange. But even if you say 'an orange' there are questions – what kind of orange, what family of orange? When you look at an orange, is the 'orangeness' of the orange revealed in what you actually see or by what you know about it? Once you start putting stories onto the orange you're turning it into a 'thing' – a member of a particular family of fruit that's been highly developed and cultivated by human beings – but this is not essential to the orange; there is no essence to the orange.

The traditional Indian example for this is the banana tree. If you've ever seen a banana tree it's made up of layers, like an onion. When you slice into an onion there is no big seed in the middle like in an avocado, there is just layer after layer of 'onioning'. So what is the heart, or centre, or essence of the onion? The onion is the operating together of various layers of fibre which hold moisture, so you won't find an inside essence to the onion.

It's the same with the flowers, you can't find an 'inside essence'. If you start to take the petals off one of the roses to find out what's in the middle you can see the stamen and so on but in doing that we no longer have the rose. The rose is the co-presencing of all the elements of the rose and when these factors are operating together we have what we call 'a rose'.

In the same way, does the body have an essence? Clearly we have vital organs. If the liver collapses that's a big problem, if the kidneys go that's also a big problem, likewise with the heart, the brain and so on – there are certain things we cannot do without. Whilst you can lose a foot and, if you

get some treatment early enough, you won't die, there are critical organs, which if you lose them, you vanish. But could you say these organs are the essence of who you are?

They are an important part of the body; their functioning is important. The heart goes, 'thump, thump' and if it stops doing that it's not much use so, along with the kidneys the liver and the brain, the heart is a function. What we call 'our body' is a complex field of functioning, of processes, of communication. If you look at it in terms of 'things' then you can say 'this is the liver', 'this is the heart.' You can see drawings of a heart and you can read many medical text books on disorders of the heart and descriptions of the importance of electric currents and so on but our heart, as it is in our body, is a function linked to other functions. The body itself is not a closed system, it a communicative system which is open to the world.

So breathing in and out, the activity taking place through the pores of the skin, the information of the senses, food and liquid coming in through the mouth, urine and faeces going out for excretion – all this is the movement of the body. The body is a dynamic site of participation in the environment which is, itself, a dynamic unfolding.

If you like, that's a reasonable working description of our existence which doesn't require any notion of entities, of things. We're not a thing and because we're not a thing we cannot be grasped. When you grasp, when you become attached, you become attached to a process or an unfolding as if it was constituted out of things.

Some people here will have children so they can say 'My children...' but what does that 'my' mean? The children are off doing something... what are they doing? They are off doing what they like, but you still say they're 'your' children. Actually I have much more ownership over my watch than my children yet I don't talk about my watch in the way that I might talk about them. When I say 'my children' all that really does is to connect me with systems in the world that are somewhat unpredictable. Their lack of predictability makes for disturbances in my life, some of which are pleasant and some of which are not.

So we have the interaction of dynamic unfolding systems of the world, and then they're gone. We are here for a while and then we vanish. So is there anything inside me which is truly essential me, something that defines who I am?

## Presence without essence

From the point of view of emptiness which is elaborated in the Heart Sutra there is no essence – and yet here we are! This is something miraculous – how can I be appearing, showing, engaging with others, and yet have no definable, definite point inside?

Well, its like the appearance of a rainbow in the sky. A rainbow occurs due to factors such as the position of the sun and the presence of drops of moisture in the air. Sunlight is refracted through the droplets of water creating the impact of a rainbow. So you can't say that a drop of water is the essence of the rainbow nor can you say that the sunlight is the essence of the rainbow – the rainbow has no essence and yet it manifests.

We manifest in a similar way; we don't have a real self, or a true self, or an authentic self. What we have is a wide range of participative possibilities which we are more, or less, able to manifest depending on whether we can be at home in the arising of our potential. This ability is linked to whether our potential is grounded in its own spaciousness.

That is to say that the emptiness of the mind, the fact that it's not a thing, its very ungraspability or openness, gives rise to the possibility of being many kinds of people. This potential, this range of possibilities is then free to manifest if we don't restrict it. If I have a strong defining or essential view of myself, if I think 'I am shy' or 'I'm very greedy' or whatever it would be, that definition is going to influence how I can manifest in the world.

So, if I'm very greedy I need to have more than other people and I always need to know what will be available. Whenever the aunt of a friend of mine went travelling she would take five packets of chocolate biscuits and bars of chocolate too because, as she said 'if you go to stay with friends you never know how they are going to feed you.' In that sense she knew what she was like, and in order to continue her sense of being who she was, she had to

know that she would be able to eat chocolate when she wanted. Therefore going into an environment in which the provision of chocolate was in question created a fundamental anxiety in the core of her being. Luckily a large suitcase helped!

We all do similar things. We look for particular repeated patterns to confirm the continuity of our existence as something, as someone – 'I know I'm me because this is how I feel inside'. But of course sometimes our lives hit crisis and bad things happen to us. We may get sick or our kids get in trouble, we lose our jobs or there's trouble in our relationship, and then suddenly we're somebody who we don't feel we are – 'I'm not me anymore, this shouldn't be happening to me.' Then, because our definition of who we are and the ways that we had of proving to ourselves that 'we are who we are' is now not available to us, we become alienated from the actual nature of our existence. So we have a situation where there's a conflict between the map in our head, the map that shows us the pathways of our life, and what is actually in front of us. When the map doesn't fit the territory there's only two choices: you can keep reading the map and not look where you're going or you can look where you're going and then, when you see that the map doesn't fit, become a map maker.

**Question** : Where is that greediness you were talking about, who is the one who is having that experience of being greedy, who is the one who sees the rainbow?

**James** : Clearly we are seeing the rainbow, so in that moment of experience we have to look into ourselves.

We can try this in this room just now. We are all here in our senses, we are all seeing something, we are all aware of being in this room. Then onto that we can put many opinions – 'I like being in this room, I don't like being in this room. The air is getting a bit stale, or the lighting is a bit funny, or the seat isn't very comfortable.' The immediacy of the perception of the room seems a bit neutral, there's not many hooks in that for me to hang my personality, so we add a little bit of judgement – 'I like, I don't like, it's good, it's bad'. Like buying new shoes and wearing them in until they become more comfortable, we put our familiar judgements onto the situation and think 'hmm...now this fits better.'

**Question** : Where is that process happening?

**James** : Where do you think it's happening? You can observe for yourself that it's happening just now – it's happening in your mind. So the central question is, where is your mind?

The mind is empty, it's not like a little factory or a radio transmitting station, a central hub that's projecting out this stuff. When we look and see that there is no essence we see that there is no hub, there is no centre. What is there is a space within which different feelings manifest; the space is, itself, pervaded by awareness.

So in the traditional Buddhist examples it says that the mind is like the sky and awareness is like the sun. The sky is illuminated by the sun and it is empty; you don't find anything substantial in the sky, it has no essence at all. In the same way when you look for the mind, there is nothing there and yet it is illuminated, and within that illumination many things happen.

The radiance of the sun sends out light and heat, and these forms of energy create transformation. Similarly our awareness, in contact with this room, reveals various things. It reveals people in different ways – we see the different shapes of people and we see the nature of their skin. People of different ages have a different quality of skin and we see that, then something else that arises, then something else.

If we say 'I look at someone's face and I see their skin' that is a fact. Then I can have an emotional reaction to that skin because it looks like my mother's skin or the skin of one of my children when they were a baby or whatever heuristic or interpretive metaphor arises. So then I have the fact layered with the interpretation – and we're back to the bread with the jam or marmite on top! I am spreading the marmite because 'I like this' or 'I don't like this' — this is the sort of ordinary metaphor or interpretive paradigm that we live inside. The dharma would say that if you look clearly at what seems to be 'the bread' you will find that this is also a mental event. You will find that, prior to your interpretation, there is nothing there – if you take the interpretation away it's just very spacious.

**Question:** When you're saying these things you say 'I', if you take the 'I' away what is left?

**James:** Well you're still here but what is the nature of that something which is still here, is it a thing? Only you can answer this.

**Question:** I understand that what you feel is a process but when you watch a movie, if you take away the 'you' from it, where is it being seen?

**James :** Well exactly, but the 'you' may be part of the movie because when you look at a movie you are interpreting the movie.

### Does experience leave a trace?

Meditation texts say 'open to experience as sky to sky'. So the mind itself is like the sky and the phenomenological field is like the sky and these two skies encounter each other. There is open, un-impeded, co-presencing within which thoughts, feelings, sensations, colours, sounds, smells, touch and so on, arise and pass.

Since we came into this room this morning at ten o'clock, many things have happened. They've happened and they've gone – different sensations in the body, feelings, thoughts, perceptions, all gone. Where did they come from, where do they go to? Do they leave a trace? The question is also, what sort of substance would take the trace?

This room is full of air and if I move my finger through it there will be a subtle movement of the air. Although a little fly going by would feel some turbulence, for the purpose of this example, we could say that my finger is leaving no trace – if you want to see where the finger is you have to look at the finger. However if I was doing this on water it would leave a trace and it would leave a very definite trace on sand. So, to a greater or lesser degree, each medium records the movement.

In terms of my personality, in terms of my ego-self, the texture of my identity is like treacle: 'I am a sensitive soul, If people are nice to me I am happy but if they're not nice to me I'm sad!'... and that's probably true for most of us. We get impacted by the world and start thinking: 'Why is this happening to me? I don't like the fact that this is happening to me.' and then we go round and round on the same thing. It's like when you were a kid rubbing away at

a piece of paper with an eraser, eventually you make a hole in it. In the same way, you grind a pathway into yourself.

So clearly there are aspects of our arising which get marked. Are these aspects of our arising essences of ourselves or are they part of the movement of experience? This is the area of post-traumatic stress disorder – where people experience a trauma and it impacts them and they don't recover. It's a big area in mental health and has a lot of money riding on it in various ways.

In the paper last week there was a sad story of a young man with a stable job who volunteered to go to Afghanistan. When he returned his personality was completely changed – he was angry all the time – and then he killed himself. That's tragic.

What happened to 'him' was that his self-construct went into a situation where he was asked to do things, and where he saw things, which couldn't be integrated into his self-construct. He then feels 'I am now not me because I am doing and seeing things which I wouldn't ordinarily do. I thought I wanted to do it but the actual felt contours of my capacity mean I can't.' But of course if you're a soldier you don't want to tell the other squaddies that you can't do it because there is a terribly competitive atmosphere. So people have to be braver than they actually are and they take on more and more stress until it's inside.

But if, as these traditional buddhist notions indicate, the mind is like a mirror or the sky, where is that stress held? What takes up this marking – where is this glue, where is this treacle? — It is manifestation that takes up the marking.

## The mind and its contents

So, just now I'm going to open up the topic of the relationship between the mind and the content mind – there are many books in the tibetan tradition

on this topic if you are interested – and we are going right back to the question: who is the experiencer of the experience?

All that I know myself to be is the content of the mind – patterns of experience and interpretation. These patterns continue through time but not continuously because they are evoked according to the particular circumstances.

If somebody says something that upsets me '*I feel upset*' and, in that moment this statement feels pretty definitional of who I am. The upset seems to be core, to be coming right up through my bowels – 'I don't like it! I really don't want to see that person again. I'm really upset, I'm backing off.' and I'm encapsulated in the feeling. A couple of days later my experience probably is not like that; I might still be willing to slag off that person if anyone is willing to listen, because that's quite a pleasurable activity, but the grief that their behaviour caused me has dispersed. It's just gone and yet it was so real.

So the momentary identification with a particular contouring of experience feels definitional of who I am but then that dissolves and I am identifying with something else, and then with something else. People talk about sexual promiscuity but actually existential promiscuity is something we all practice! We are ceaselessly identifying with event after event after event, fusing with them and feeling them and often talking of them as if they were the totality of our experience.

From the point of view of dzogchen this is a kind of 'almost but not quite' spontaneous immediacy. The feeling of being hungry could be a way to look at this because if you start to feel hungry, you feel hungry and then, if you get really hungry, all you want is to eat something. That 'I'm wanting contact with food' is now the main thing and it's the mobilising factor in a kind of gestalt cycle: I'm becoming pre-occupied, I don't want contact with anything else, I just want to eat something. Then, when I eat, there's a degree of satisfaction, so there's a release from that preoccupation... and then I'm caught up in something else, and then something else. But who is the one who is caught up? Is that the mind itself or an aspect of the content of the mind?

## Fusing with arisings

The function of meditation is to see that the one who is caught up is always a content, it's a subjective content. We have if you like, objective and subjective aspects of our existence, both are 'us'. So I can say, 'I have a pain in my foot.' I'm not saying that 'I am my foot' but that my foot as an object is intimately linked to myself as a subject. Both I and my foot are me, both are constitutive of who I am.

If I have a pain in my foot then, in that moment, the foot is giving a sensation which I am interpreting as pain – 'I have a pain in my foot'. If the pain is intense then that will wrap me, it will grow a little skin around me. In that encapsulated moment I will be existing as if that is all there is – 'I can't think!' – emotions and thinking have gone, there's an absolute absencing of everything else. This state feels immediate and total and yet it doesn't last forever – it continues until some kind person takes me to the accident and emergency department and the doctor does some procedure to help the pain go away. Then what appeared to be me, as the subject, has gone and yet I'm still here. This is what we mean when we say he 'the mind is open and full of potential.'

It's the openness of the mind that allows all these potential forms – 'I need to have a pee, I need to go to the bank, I must remember to do that, is the post office still open?' all these movements that we get caught up in. We have to be identified with them because that is what our life is; our life is the manifestation of energy in the field of becoming.

If I'm going to arrive in Macclesfield on time then I have to know when the train leaves Euston. I do the packing, knowing that I've got to walk up the high street to get on the train that goes to Euston and get there in time to buy my ticket. In this way I become the director of myself, or the conductor of my own orchestra, bringing all the bits of my life together. Within that, sometimes I'm in charge and sometimes I'm not.

When I came up north yesterday I was walking along the platform, looking at the train, and suddenly the doors closed. I looked up at the clock and there was only two minutes before the train was due to leave, so I opened the nearest doors and just made it onto the train. I had arrived on the platform in time but because I was thinking 'I'm on the platform, that's great, I'll get

on the train' I had lost the sense of the time of the train leaving and nearly missed it.

So we're really like a kind of concertina because at any moment the kind of panoramic vision – which is the real interdependence of subject and object in the field – can collapse. Who is the one who gets angry? Who is the one who gets sad? It is the radiance of the openness spiralling into itself and creating the illusion of an entrapped world – which then releases itself.

### Separated off – inside a bubble

A very nice piece of dharma homework to do is, like little children, get some washing up liquid, put it in a cup and get a little blower and blow bubbles. When you blow a bubble a very thin skin forms itself around air. The air on the outside of the bubble and the air on the inside of the bubble is the same, but when you see the bubble you think 'Ooh... it's a *bubble!*' The 'bubbleness' of the bubble gives the sense that it's something completely unique from everything around it. You watch the bubble moving, then it pops and you see the little drops falling down, and the air is again merged with the air from which it was never really separated.

This is what happens in these moments when we get caught up in something. A little illusory skin wraps itself around us and we're trapped. Sometimes these traps can last a very long time; because we can bear grudges we can stay profoundly trapped.

The more you stay in the bubble, the less connected you are with the field. If you're not connected with the field you don't know what's going on, all you've got is your fantasy about what's going on. If I place my hands over my eyes and say 'you can't see me!' that is true, but at the same time *I can't see you* so you guys could be doing anything! I'm not safe where I'm hiding I'm actually incredibly vulnerable and this is the problem with all neurotic refuges. When you retreat into yourself in any way, whether it's an anxiety or a depression, taking too much alcohol or whatever, that 'sealing yourself under the duvet' makes you very vulnerable because you are not in contact with the field.

These bubbles of identification which we, in the experience of them, feel to be our essence, have no essence and are the primary way in which we get lost. So the buddhist teaching on emptiness is to see that there is no individual substance in any phenomenon. This doesn't mean there is nothing, it means that what is there is appearance, and because it's appearance you can work with it. So the world is much more malleable and responsive than we take it to be when we're caught up in our individual concerns.

**Question:** How would an enlightened being cope with tragedy and trauma, would they just self-liberate?

**James:** They would probably be upset, although it wouldn't last too long. This would be the middle way: if you didn't feel anything you'd have turned yourself into a stone but if you felt it for a very long period of time you would be going wrong because things only last if we hang on to them.

**Question:** I was really taken by the image of the man in Afghanistan. I was thinking if a dzogchen practitioner went there and saw those things would they just be able to self-liberate when they came back or would they be sitting in their room at the hospital saying 'I can't get this out of my mind.'

**James:** I've just been revising a translation of a prayer by a Lama who died many years ago, Dudjom Rinpoche. At the end of it, in the colophon, he says 'I wrote this at a time when I felt completely sad about everything.' He wrote it after he had come into India as a Tibetan refugee, leaving his monastery, leaving behind many of his followers and so on, and when he saw the state of the Tibetan refugees in India who were very poor and living under such hard circumstances, he was desolate.

One could wonder how someone who could be regarded as the greatest meditator and scholar in the nyingma tradition be so desolate? But the question would be, how could he not be? Dharma practice is not about becoming impervious and untouched, it's about how to feel completely, infinitely, and then be open to something else. So the fact that many people are suffering doesn't mean that you are not able to feel happiness.

**Question:** You spoke about traces earlier on, I'm very interested in that because there must be a purpose in memory – so we know how to do things.

So we're using the traces of our experiences in everyday practical ways but then there are also emotional traces which can be good as well, so while we're tilting into the world and every moment is a fresh new experience, isn't it an illusion of freshness because it's full of the traces of the past?

**James** : Well it depends on what a trace is. You might have a trace of some food on the front of your clothes if you have been eating in an unaware way – that's one kind of trace. But if you look around this room you see many things and if you look around at them again you know that you've seen them before but unless you particularly looked at them there was no trace left over from your first looking. So the original looking results in a potential for recognition rather than a trace.

We make traces. Due to attachment we link one thing to another and then another and another; yet everything in here has a space, its own space, and in its own space it's settled and yet it's sharing the space. So we feel we are in our skin bag, inside ourselves, but we are sharing the space with each other. If you attend to a particular phenomenon, it becomes figural and everything else recedes into the background. The background hasn't gone anywhere, it's still there, it doesn't leave a trace and it will come back if you need to address it.

For this Lama, in that moment of being in touch with the sadness, probably some Tibetan refugees had come to see him and they were crying and worried and upset. The Dalai Lama has had this experience many times and it's very sad, so the Dalai Lama cries. Then he has to do something else – so the sadness stops and he does something else.

Now you might think that's a kind of compartmentalisation, as if he is having to wrap it somewhere, but it's gone... and when it's gone it's gone. This doesn't mean it won't come back but if some children are just going to sing a song about how much they love the Dalai Lama and he is there crying about the refugees it will upset the children. He is able to smile because the earlier sadness left no trace. But we have a trace if we are thinking 'that's terrible, it shouldn't have happened. I can't get it out of my mind'.

The Dalai Lama is leaving the sadness in his mind, he's not trying to move it around. When there's a time to think of the sadness of refugees, he thinks of

the sadness of refugees, and when he's doing something else, he's doing something else. The sadness is not some horrible toxic thing to be got rid of. This controlling mechanistic view, of wanting to push away all the bad things and hang on to all the good things doesn't really help us; when you're into mental hygiene you're endlessly trying to edit your world. Actually when you're sad, you're sad. If you're really sad it will go, and if you're really happy it will go. So impermanence is the natural purification of the mind — in the dzogchen tradition this is called self-liberation.

## The Heart Sutra – integration of apples and pears

The Heart Sutra is very famous, all the schools of mahayana buddhism make use of it. It is embedded in stories and, in the Tibetan story, the Heart Sutra arises at the time of Buddha Shakyamuni. If you were to look at it from the point of view of western historical analysis you would have to say it was not taught at the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, it's a much later production. So why would buddhists who are concerned with the truth say something which isn't true? What are they trying to establish?

They are trying to say this is true because the ultimate signifier says so. If you were in a theistic tradition you would say God has revealed this to me. In the buddhist tradition you would say 'this goes right back to the time of the Buddha and if the Buddha said it, it must be true'. This is helpful in terms of faith, but not very helpful in terms of being able to think about things.

The actual text of the heart sutra is very interesting because it begins with Buddha Shakyamuni sitting in meditation and in his meditation practice he evokes a particular quality in the mind of a bodhisattva, Avolokiteshvara.

Avolokiteshvara's mind is very relaxed and clear and open and then Shariputra who, in the theravadan tradition is one of the very close disciples of Buddha Shakyamuni, asks a question and the question is deflected from the Buddha to Avolokiteshvara. This is saying that Shariputra has to ask a question because he doesn't know the answer, so it is political. It is a way of saying 'Mahayana Buddhism wins!' – who knows the answer...the mahayana buddhist does!

You will find this device used in any political history or religious discourse but it's very important to notice this kind of thing because it allows us to see how meanings are constructed. It doesn't undermine the meaning which is being generated but it does show that we are always engaged in games when we interact with each other.

Power cannot be removed from the human dimension and because power is such an important part of our lives we are condemned to winning and losing. So although we may talk of equanimity and loving kindness to all beings, our behaviour is conditional. We can be very generous as long as our group is winning but if our group is not winning then we get a bit more angry, rigid or uptight.

It is very important to see how pervasive this is because once you start imagining that the buddha is completely perfect and completely pure and never has any problems, that he's floating way up in the sky and it's all very nice, then you have problems. You take this as a sign that buddhahood is very far away from you and feel you have to go away and sort out your problems and then come back when you are a nice person. If you happen to die in the middle of that process you think that you will have another chance in the next life. This is not very sensible!

The notion of good buddhas and bad human beings results from splitting. Asking how can bad human beings become good buddhas is like asking how can an apple become a pear? It cannot, they are not the same. However an apple can become the same as a pear if we see that they that they are both fruit. That's how it's done – it's not so difficult.

Human beings and buddhas are manifestations of the open potential of being and in that sense they are both the same – they are both fruit. If you say 'How do "I" become a buddha?' you will never be a buddha because you're trying to go from one category into another and that's not possible. As long as you believe that these are two oppositional categories your mind is addicted to dualism. You are setting this against that; for you they are like night and day. Night and day cannot be in the same place at the same time because they are opposites, they are back to back, and so inside their own definition a union of opposites becomes impossible.

The apple and the pear are not the same but if you change the frame of reference to 'fruit' then of course they are both fruit, everybody knows that apples and pears are fruit. You can also stick a banana and a pineapple into a fruit bowl, they don't look anything like each other but they are all fruit.

In this way you can see that how you organise information, how you categorise phenomena, is enormously important. If you want to have integration you have to have an attitude which has enough space inside it to allow each thing to be as it is without being set against another thing by the use of internal definitions.

You know that an apple is not a pear but when you say they are both fruit you see the emptiness of the apple and the emptiness of the pear. When the apple is full of appleness and the pear is full of pearness and they stand there like two rugby teams ready for battle how could they possibly be friends because they are structurally in conflict. Each is defining themselves by saying they are not whatever the opposite is. The apple says 'piss off pear you're nothing to do with me, I'm not like you, I'm round. Has somebody sat you on or something? You've got this squishy bit!'

But as soon as you say 'fruit', the oppositional categories – the 'appleness' of the apple and the 'peariness' of the pear – dissolves, like a summertime cloud into the sky and there is just 'fruit'... and you put the fruit in the fruit bowl. Maybe when you go to sleep at night they have a big battle but probably not; because they're in the fruit bowl they are natural allies, they are friends. You can apply this image to all the categories of information that you have.

If you are interested in motor cars then the differences between them are very interesting, if you are not interested then they are just motor cars. People who are really into mobile phones go deeply into the technical specifications. When we put our mind onto and into the particularities of situations and invest them with enormous significance we cut a circle around them which then separates them and puts them into opposition with the other phenomena. We don't see the most important thing which is that they share emptiness. None of these phenomena – cars, phones, whatever it might be – has a true essence, a true inherent self-nature, and so from that

point of view they're all the same. They are not the same on the level of manifestation but they are the same on the level of their nature.

### ... reflections in the mirror-like mind

Another traditional example that many of you will know very well is that of the mirror. The function of a mirror is to show many different reflections so when you look in to the mirror perhaps, as well as your face, you see images of the wall behind you, a painting, or someone else in the room. You could smile or do many different things and so many different appearances arise in the mirror. These appearances are different and if you are looking at the differences that could be very significant. So if you're looking in the mirror and you're shaving or putting on lipstick it helps you to see where your lips are or what bits you're cutting because you don't want to have blood coming out of your cheek. The mirror can help you to see what you're doing — in that moment the mirror is helping to differentiate the right and the wrong place to put the lipstick or the eyeshadow or the pressure of the razor.

However, all of these images which arise in the mirror are reflections; so although their manifestation is different, their nature is that of reflections. If you look on the level of manifestation at the image in front of you, you can say 'I can see my nose and I can see my ear and they are not the same!' however both your ear and your nose are reflections in the mirror so their nature is the same. Although they are different, one is not more real than the other, both are merely reflections.

If you see this, although it's very simple, it really means something. All the differences in the world are there but they don't imply something truly existing or concrete. The differences are merely conventional, they are names and associations and identifications which arise in terms of recognition of a particular shape, but they don't make anything which is truly existing.

If nothing is truly existing then one can be much more relaxed as to how life is. If we see that it really is a reflection then it's not so horrifying. It's like if you watch a very happy movie it makes you feel good and if you watch a movie that's a bit sad you feel sad; if you're watching some kind of domestic drama or a horror film then that makes you feel very different – but none of these films are real. There is no truth in a film, there are just actors pretending something was the case when it was not. If you understand that what you saw was a movie then you can still feel the power of the movie and say 'that was a good movie' but if you take it as real then it's going to have a much stronger effect on you. This is at the heart of the notion of the illusory nature and it avoids the two extremes – it's not that there's nothing there at all but neither is it the case that it's truly real.

## The five skandhas

When Shariputra asks his question 'How should the son or daughter of a noble family course in, or act according to, the nature of the supreme transcendental wisdom?' Avolokiteshvara starts to reply and this is the beginning of the heart sutra.

He begins in a very famous way by saying that the basic familiar constituents of the world are devoid of inherent self-nature. He explains this according to the Indian, Pali and Sanskrit system of the five khandas or skandhas: form, feeling, perception, association and consciousness. He does this because, in the earlier forms of Buddhism, what it means to be a person was analysed in terms of the patterning or juxtaposition of these five categories.

As western people, we have a bit of a problem with this because the five skandhas don't really mean very much to us on an emotional level – we don't normally think of our existence in these terms. If a friend phoned you up and they were very upset and they said 'I don't know what's happened to me, my five skandhas are out of balance.' it wouldn't mean anything to you. If they phoned you and they said 'I've lost my budgie' you would probably have more empathic attunement. So it is important to try to understand what the five skandhas mean in terms of your own experience – when you look at

yourself, when you look at what you seem to be made up from, how do you understand this?

We probably all have a sense that we are constituted out of memories and also our hopes, fears, longings, ambition, pride, anger and so forth. We can probably give a big list of the various winds or vectors that blow through us and bring our lives into particular shapes. This is the information you want to use because when reading a traditional text like the heart sutra the key thing is to make it sing to you. In this way you can see for yourself that memory is empty, emptiness is not other than memory; hope is empty, emptiness is not other than hope. Sadness is empty, emptiness is not other than sadness, and so on with all of the things which make you feel real. Whatever seem to be the building blocks of your existence – your bones, your liver, your kidneys, the name of your grandmother, the names of your grandchildren – these are what we need to see as empty. Although you can learn all kinds of lists of Sanskrit words and Asian concepts if they are not functional, as ways of organising your own experience on a day to day basis, it's unlikely that knowing that they are 'empty' will make much difference to you.

If you had your life savings in Northern Rock, when you heard on the radio that Northern Rock is bankrupt and its vaults are empty that really means something; if you've got your money in Barclays you don't care. So if it's 'your story' it means something to you; this is why we have to explore for ourselves what it is that we think we are made of. You can also do this in relation to the people you are connected with, the possessions you have – maybe things you've inherited, special books or paintings, or a job you might have, your training and skills, whatever seems to be the basis for your own sense of self. I would suggest you write down a list of these things and then look at them and try to see whether there is some true essence there.

For example, say you are very good at languages and can speak Russian but you are living in Macclesfield – well known for its high Russian population! Maybe quite a few months go by and you don't speak any Russian. In that case, even if you studied Russian at university and you are fluent in it, the building block 'I speak Russian' is a non-functional grounding of yourself. Although it doesn't have a functional meaning it has a symbolic and sentimental meaning and, like a little piece of wood, it's propping up your sense of identity.

We have all sorts of sentimental attachments and I think these also need to be looked at because they can mean something. For example, I'm Scottish but I don't live in Scotland and I do not want to live in Scotland. I find it a cold unpleasant country yet because I am Scottish not English this is a sentimental identification which is completely non-functional in my life. It does not evoke the thought 'Oh when I retire I'll go to Scotland, the land of my fathers!' What would I do there? It's ghastly – truly that's my experience – other people may like it but what I'm saying is that that identification is constitutive of me. So we're not talking about being rational but about really looking and examining in yourself... 'what sings for you?' No matter how weird and perverse or ridiculous it might seem if you say it, it might be something you rest your entire existence upon – 'this is who I am, this defines me.' These are the things we have to look into; is there any truth in what we find or can we say it's an illusion?

The fact that England is an illusion and Scotland is an illusion doesn't mean that I don't prefer to be in one place than another. This is important, we're not saying that because it is illusion it means nothing at all. We're not talking about nihilism and an annihilation of any meaning – where everything is put into a machine that homogenises it into a kind of farmyard slurry. Each thing is precisely as it is in all its particular detail, but that detail shows what it is – it is nothing other than the showing of the detail. There is nothing behind the screen, nothing at all.

## The mystery of existence

Now this is the great mystery of existence and every great religion faces the same question – how does something come out of nothing? Every religion and every culture has creation myths. Some say that people fell from the sky, sometimes they say there was a great cosmic egg, sometimes they say there were seven cosmic eggs, there are many stories about how the first human being came into existence.

The buddhist teaching is not saying that there was non-existence and then there was something, it's saying that whatever you take to be something is simultaneously nothing. It's not 'either something or nothing' it's 'both something and nothing'. Form is emptiness, emptiness is form; form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form. So it's not that there

was a big primordial darkness and God breathed upon the waters and spoke and everything came into being – that somehow something came out of nothing; it's that the appearance of something is inseparable from nothing.

This brings us back to the traditional example of the mirror. The mirror has no content of its own, so in that sense you could say that it is nothing. It is always full of a content which is not itself, so the mirror shows the other not the self. You can't see a mirror, what you see is a reflection, so the mirror shows itself as being other than it is. It is because it is empty of a self-defining 'mirroriness' that endless numbers of reflections can arise within it.

In the same way, everything has the nature of emptiness. This emptiness is not something far away, something we have to realise by doing something mystical, emptiness is here right now as the actual nature of all phenomena.

## The emptiness of personal bias

Now we are in Saturday afternoon. In a European country this is redolent with meaning because on Friday night we stop work, Saturday and Sunday we are free, then on Monday we go back to work. For many people Saturday afternoon means watching nonsense on the television or maybe going for a walk or watching football. It has a feeling tone to it which is a social construction. If you feel that feeling tone it's because you feel it. It's not that you are picking up the vibe of Saturday afternoon, the feeling tone is a shared social construct. The 'Saturdayness' of Saturday is not a 'special essence' – something essential to the day – because in other cultures that holiday feeling happens on a different day. When I lived in Bengal the holiday was Wednesday and in many muslim countries it is Friday, so these are conventions.

When you live in your convention it seems to be internally true, it seems to have a meaning which is welling up from inside it. It seems obvious – you would have to be stupid not to understand what Saturday afternoon is – 'come on ...everybody knows!' Maybe everybody in Macclesfield but not everybody in India or everybody in China. This shows that my construct of Saturday being something special is just one of the props of my world.

Similarly if you've had the weekend off then Monday morning means something – maybe 'ugh!' – but if you work on a Sunday then Monday morning is just another morning. If you feel the affective power of 'Monday morning' that's your construct – it's an invested phenomenon which is singing to you because you can hear the tune of Monday morning. It is you who is saying 'this is important, this is real, this really exists, it's undeniable!' But it's only 'true' for you because you believe in it, other people don't hear the same tune. If you didn't believe in it, if you hadn't heard many people say that Monday mornings are difficult then Monday would be just another day. When Monday morning becomes significant you can feel the energy of your mind binding itself around a signifier – 'Monday morning!' – and creating a condensed nexus of feeling.

We need to see their emptiness of these signifiers. They will be different for each person and I would suggest that if you make this investigation for yourself you will get a lot more out of it than you will through investigating the emptiness of the five skandhas. You only have the five skandhas if they are operational, and you don't actually *have* five skandhas it's just a way of thinking about it, nothing exists in truth.

For Tibetan buddhists the mind is in the heart so they are not very interested in the brain; for others the brain and Mr Darwin create a particular nexus full of feelings and they think of the mind as being in the head. So there are those who believe in this and find it marvellous while others find it a very strange and rather unpleasant idea.

What's essential to see is the emptiness of the nature of your own bias of 'what I like and what I don't like' because as long as you believe these biases are true you won't have a sense of the illusory nature of things.

### Spot the emptiness!

If you look in a mirror something might catch your eye and you think 'It's a spot. Oh no, I've got a spot!' but unless you can take your eye out and turn it around you don't see your own spot, you see a reflection. This is the cheapest cream ladies, you don't have to buy anything expensive, you just look at your face, see the spot and realise 'it's a reflection', then you feel beautiful again! This is very simple! But instead we think 'Oh no! I've got a

spot and I'm going out, it's Friday night, a very important night. How can I go out on a Friday night with a spot? If I squeeze it, it might get worse, if I cover it over I'll have a lump of cream on my face and I'm not allowed to wear a veil – the tragedies of modern life!

You have never actually seen the spot so it's a figment of your imagination; your anxiety is being built up on the basis of a reflection. Also, as you worry about the spot you imagine that everyone else is looking at it – after all what other purpose do people have? I know there is some cultural life in the great city of Macclesfield but underneath there is the paranoia that everybody is walking around looking at other peoples' spots!

Once we invest something with significance it becomes 'real' for us. Real is linked with the Latin word 'res' which means 'thing' and it is through our investment that we transform what is actually a moment of experience into a thing, an entity, something existing 'in itself.' Spots come and go; we're not in charge of our metabolism, we're not in charge of all the various forces that cause an eruption on the skin, yet we think 'I don't want it to be here. I shouldn't be like this. This shouldn't be happening to me!' If you find life with spots so difficult what will happen when you get cancer?

In this way we start to see that we have a basic belief: 'I should be able to live life on my terms. I should be able to control what happens to me and, more importantly, I should be able to control how other people see me.' This is far from a notion of illusion – through our own mental processes everything is becoming condensed, paranoid and fearful.

Form is emptiness – so the form of the spot is emptiness and emptiness is showing the form of a spot. This seems very inadequate! Whoever designed a universe which allows the basic creative potential of existence to manifest such things as spots? It's ridiculous. Theists at least can rage at God for acne but what have we got to blame but our own karma? Then we are trying to work out 'what did I do in a last life to make this spot come on my face on a Friday night?' ...but is it real?

The seeming reality of things is linked to our investment in them so it becomes real for me because I don't want it to happen. The less we invest the more we are able to see things as they are, and if we see things as they

are we can work with them. What is riding on the spot? We have such a thing as 'self-esteem' – we want other people to like us. We think 'if I have spots on my face they won't like me enough to make me feel likeable.' This is an area to investigate with emptiness because the basic agenda i'm taking towards the world is: I want you to like me and to think I'm good, and then I'll start to feel safe.

You can imagine that everybody has this same agenda and that they use it as the basis for trying to work out what what criteria other people have in their minds by which they will judge whether we're ok to fit into their agenda. We can't see their agenda so we have to imagine they have the same agenda as us. In this way we imagine everybody else is hypersensitive about the things we become hypersensitive about and of course that's not true.

## The peace of equanimity

There are too many people in the world to please everyone – this has been said many times. There will always be people who don't like us, people who think we're not very nice, so what do we do with that, how do we accept that? From the buddhist point of view we do this on the point of equanimity: 'May I act towards my friends and towards my enemies with the same orientation, being open to all sentient beings rather than trying to please my friends and trying to attack or disregard my enemies.'

The benefit of equanimity is that you don't get involved in such a stormy sea and so you're not being rocked this way and that. The essential point being that 'it is what it is'. We are neither in control nor completely powerless; by staying in the middle we can participate and influence events to a certain extent.

Influence speaks of flowing but how are you going to flow if you become very rigid and over determined? The more you grasp onto something as being strongly real the more you make your stand and, because there's not much you can do with your fixed beliefs, you become like a locked fist. Whereas if you are 'hands-on' then you are part of what is going on, you can manipulate and influence the world, and that's probably the best way to survive.

In the tantric tradition this is the function of the nirmanakaya – the manifestation of the buddha coming into the world – which shows different forms according to the various needs of sentient beings and it requires the flexibility to become different according to the situation. The more we have a fixed position the more our capacity for compassion is going to be limited because we're going to be giving compassion on our terms, according to the particular shape we have. If compassion means 'to be available for the other' this requires us to show different forms; there is a call for our potential to manifest differently.

I would suggest that can only happen when we've loosened up inside. This is why the teaching of the Heart Sutra is very important — we can use it as a key to unlock all these tightened closed places where there seems to be some definite knowledge.

### The flow of energy...

In the energy systems of eastern practice, particularly in the yoga system, there is an idea that we have many channels running through the body. The winds, or the energy potential of the body, moves through these channels. Some of them are quite big others are very small, and they move out like the branches of a tree from the central channel that runs through the body.

When communication collapses these branch lines become cut off from the source. The energy can't flow through as it should and it just vibrates up and down in them like wind trapped in a bamboo pipe. Then habitual agitations arise from that and we get states of arousal or depression or confusion. One sense of the function of the practice is to bring the energy back into the central channel – which is a dynamic expression of emptiness – so that all the energy of the body is linked and communicating together.

This is something we can check out for ourselves – we don't need to have any special initiations or teachings for this. You can see whether you are prone to anger, jealousy or desire, whether you're very quick or very slow in arousal. See what times of the day you have energy – in the morning or the evening? Which kinds of food agree with you and which don't. All of these show the interface between your energetic system and the environment around you.

It's not about correcting energy. Millions of therapists make their money showing people how to correct their energy but, while that can have a useful impact on your health, the key thing is to see is that this body *is* energy; to see that when the energy flows in a free and uninhibited way, without artificial constraint, then it finds itself in the environment. However when I'm locked into myself due to inhibitions which are psychological or superego, where some injunction or prohibition has come into me, then I'm not free to move.

However if you see the emptiness of the limitation then you don't have to change the limitation. This is very, very important because on the level of development, on the level of the fulfilment of your potential, there will always be things to do; in this life and in all your future lives you can become better and better and better. But at this very moment all your good qualities and all your bad qualities are empty and, if you practice and practice and practice, in the future when you rise up on the beautiful lotus flower and float through space as a fully enlightened buddha, all of your qualities will be empty. Through all this practice you will have gained a different colour of emptiness! Now you have a dirty grey emptiness and in the future you will have a bright shiny emptiness but both will be empty because, from the very beginning, everything is emptiness.

### The unconstructed nature of wisdom...

This understanding is the basis of all the tantric practices and of dzogchen. If this is not clear then the practices becomes very confusing because people then try to become better. Becoming better is like practicing the piano, you keep practicing and practicing but you never get to the place where you can 'really play the piano'. Even when you hear a wonderful pianist being interviewed, someone like Brendel, you will hear them say 'well, I'm still worried about this or that' because it's in the very nature of manifestation that there's always something to be done. So if you're trying to improve yourself in order to get to the end of the journey then you bought the wrong ticket, there is no end to improvement.

Improvement is a way of life, it's not a means to an end, it's an end in itself. That is to say there is a quality of attention to how we get turned in on ourselves which, if it could be released, would allow you to move forward.

What is the motivation for improving yourself? In the mahayana tradition it is only for the sake of others. What we need *for ourselves* is to recognise our own nature; in recognising our own nature we have what's called the dharmakaya, the awakening to the ever enlightened state of the mind.

If the mind was not enlightened, what could make it enlightened? If you have some pieces of silk you could take them to a tailor and have them made into a lovely blouse. Many moments of cause and effect will have gone into its creation – into the harvesting of the silk, the weaving, the design and so on. However because it is a construct it will not last forever; all things which have a beginning will have an end. You will find this teaching in many buddhist scriptures.

Now if enlightenment is a construct it will have a beginning and therefore it will have an end so what would be the point of that? It would be like when you've taken 'O' Levels or GCSEs and the first thing big people say is 'Now it's you're 'A' Levels'. Throughout the whole of your life this never ends – there's always something. Even if you decide never to do an exam again, you still have to do a tax return and you have to remember your partner's birthday – which is another kind of exam!

The central point of this is to see that movement and stillness are not the same but not different – just as the mirror and the reflection are not the same but not different – this is non-duality. When you look in the mirror you see a reflection which is in the mirror but is not the mirror itself because if you turn the mirror that reflection is gone. So a reflection in the mirror both is, and is not, the mirror. Likewise, when you see a rainbow it's there and it's not – you can't catch a rainbow.

The basis of the mind is like the mirror, it's open. When we sit, there is nothing to grasp and yet all kinds of experiences are happening for us. There are sounds from outside, from cars, from people moving in the room, coughing and so on, so there is a continuity of experience. The coming and going all of that experience is the domain of movement.

Movement is on the side or family of compassion; stillness, which never changes, is in the family, or on the side of wisdom. These two are born together and are inseparable, but they are not the same. When you develop

your qualities this is compassion not wisdom. Wisdom is not something you can develop, it is something you can see, something you can taste, but you can't develop it because it's always fully formed.

If it wasn't fully formed it would just be another construct and then it would be just like learning Russian, every day you decide to learn ten words. First of all you learn the present tense then you learn the past tense then you learn the future tense and after a couple of years you are quite fluent in Russian. If you don't speak Russian for the next twenty years you'll find that you've lost half your vocabulary which demonstrates that your knowledge of Russian is a construct.

This is typical of all the things you learnt when you went to school – algebra and so on. If we had Ofsted inspectors coming through the door now we probably wouldn't do very well because that knowledge has gone. It was there, maybe we got a little certificate that we passed the exam, but afterwards there is nothing, it was just a temporary creation, no different from a palace in the summertime clouds. It's like when you lie on a hill and look up you can see shapes in the clouds – maybe you see a donkey or a rabbit – but nothing is there.

### Deep wisdom...

This distinction is important for meditation. Movement can be changed in its patterning and that's what we call development, but stillness cannot be changed because stillness isn't a thing. If you read the Heart Sutra you will see that emptiness is in the family of stillness and that movement is the ever occurring energy of the mind.

This movement can be for the sake of others or it can be selfish. You can use your energy to be helpful or to be harmful, that's a choice, but whether you help beings or you harm beings it doesn't change the mirror. You could have a big mirror on the wall in a hospital and see people being given very good care but you could also take that big mirror and put it on the wall of an abattoir and see many animals being killed. The mirror would show both scenes. We say it's good to help people and it's not so good to cut the throat of living animals, but the mirror just shows. If you understand this then you see the buddhist meaning of wisdom.

This is different from worldly wisdom. Worldly wisdom is the the accumulation of knowledge that we have built up during our lives to the point where we know something about the world – we can tell our children or grandchildren some things about how to manage being bullied at school.

Deep wisdom is to see emptiness: to see that the basis of existence is an actuality which is insubstantial. It is to see that there is no essence or substance or fixed substratum to our experience – to see that what there is is appearance.

### The showing of emptiness

We are in this room and we see all our surroundings. I am talking to you and you see me talking so you could say you see 'me'. You see my face, my eyes, my ears my nose but do you see me? What you see is me doing whatever it is I do, moving my hands up and down. I don't know why I do this, my mother never did this, my father never did this, but I have some kind of need to move around. It doesn't take any of the weight off my stomach so I'm very disappointed!

This kind of movement, the showing of 'me', is what you get. The question is, is there any 'me' behind the showing, is there a 'me' somewhere inside that is showing 'myself' to you. Do you know 'me' from what you see?

We impute, we imagine, we assume, that there is a 'James-ness' to James. You might say 'I saw James in Macclesfield and he was doing what he always does because he's 'James'', but that doesn't mean that there is a 'James essence' behind which is driving it. What it does mean is that there are factors which come into being in these circumstances that cause this showing in a particular way.

This is the same for each of you; in the different environments that you go into you display yourselves in different ways. Do you have a true self somewhere?

You might have a special friend and when you are with them, you feel most relaxed, most able to be yourself. This is quite an important point because if I think 'Actually I want to be relaxed and when I'm with Mary I feel really relaxed, being with Mary lets me see myself as I really am!' that's a sweet story, in fact you'll find it as a major storyline in Mills and Boon! 'For the first time in her life she felt ...' We know what that kind of experience is like but does that mean you are more truly yourself there? If you feel a bit awkward with someone else, then that awkwardness is also part of you.

Having a boss that you don't like and cannot get on with is an experience probably most of us have had. You go into work with a kind of dread and wonder what's going to happen next. That's also an authentic experience of life – that's me having dread. I don't like it but that doesn't mean I'm not having it.

When we think something's not right or just, we've triangulated the situation so that there's the experience, there's me, and there's my judgement about the experience. Actually I'm uncomfortable and being uncomfortable is another form of reflection in the mirror.

### The practice of hospitality to ourselves...

We will do a little bit of practice before the break and then we will come back and do more practice. This is a very simple kind of practice, just sit and as you are sitting, relax into the out breath and just be present with whatever is occurring. As much as possible avoid editing, just see however you are. If you feel sleepy or bored or if your body is sore, however it is, just be with it. Essentially the practice is to offer hospitality to the process of the flow of experience.

One of the aspects of this very simple practice is to start to see how you might offer hospitality to yourself rather than identifying with a thought. For example, if you go off on a riff about something and then think 'where have I gone, what have I done?' in that moment you are in identification with a self-comment or a subjective comment. This is not the true nature of our identity or the mind itself, rather it's a thought arising in the mind, a quality of movement in the mind. We identify with the thought as if the thought *is us*, then it carries us off; then another thought arises and we identify with that.

The reason the mind can identify with so many different thoughts is that the mind, like the mirror, has no content of its own.

We keep taking these reflections to be the mind itself so when we're sitting in open hospitality we are just letting whatever happens happen, whatever comes, comes, whatever goes, goes. Even if your mind seems very crazy or disturbed, without editing or correcting just give it space.

In a business meeting it's normal to have an agenda so that people can look at it beforehand and think of how they might want to engage with the issues under discussion. Generally speaking, in life we always have an agenda, we're always up to something, on about something. One of the functions of understanding emptiness is to free ourselves from agendas so that the on-going tilt of intentionality of our being 'for' something in particular starts to get relaxed.

So in the dzogchen texts it says 'however the mind is let it be.' If you don't try to control it then you will start to experience what it's like to have no agenda – relaxed, open and tolerant to whatever occurs. Then you start to see that the mirror and the reflections are not the same and in that moment you have complete freedom. Realising that you are the mirror and therefore it doesn't matter what's happening with the reflections – that is wisdom. Then you realise that you are also the reflection, a reflection which is compassion.

When we say hello to someone, when we chat, when we go for a cup of tea, that chatting is our energy linking with someone else's energy. This is the energy of emptiness, this is the connectivity of the non-dual field of experience and it's arising within the mirror. It's not that you come out of the mirror and go somewhere else, you don't go from limitation to freedom but limited states and open states exist inside the natural freedom of the mind.

What I've been talking about up until now is designed to help us see, without pulling the two apart, that the mirror and the reflection are not the same. So when you find yourself in a thought chasing another thought, or commenting on another thought, both thoughts are the energy of the mind, both are reflections. You are not a thought... and yet you are! We can't get rid of thoughts and just be open because that would leave a very big hole.

Balance is always there, but in order to balance ourselves on an ordinary level we just need more experience of the openness. This experience is helpful on all levels allowing us to be more accepting and tolerant of ourselves.

## Dzogchen

In the middle of the last session we were focussing mainly on emptiness but starting to move in the direction of dzogchen understanding. Dzogchen is a tradition which has many different histories given to it. Some say it comes from China, some from Tazik, some from Oddiyana. It's a tradition which is also not dissimilar to some aspects of hindu practice.

Dzogchen means 'great completion' and essentially it's saying that from the very beginning there is a natural completion in everything. It's not saying that everything is perfect in the ordinary sense of being perfect or imperfect but that there is a completion which contains all of the polarities and dualities.

Because our mind works a lot with binary oppositions when we say 'good' we also automatically think 'bad', if 'high' then 'low'. This way of thinking creates a sense of conflict, of difference as being inoperable. For example, if we think 'water' we may think 'fire' and if you pour enough water onto a fire you will put the fire out. So because fire and water are antithetical or opposite to each other, their coming together won't lead to a creative synthesis.

However, they are both elements, so this is like the earlier example of apples and pears. Although there appears to be conflict on one level, as soon as we recognise that they are both fruit, or in this case elements, we have a wider perspective. This perspective takes away the tension lines which are established by saying that an apple is not a pear and a pear is not an apple.

## The dharmadatu...

The main function of dzogchen teaching and practice is to allow us to wake up where we are. It's not about becoming something other than we are but about seeing how we actually are. The focus is on becoming aware of that which has always been there but has been ignored, rather than on the development of manifest qualities.

In a very ordinary example, we would say that there are many fish in the sea but as far as we know the fish are not aware of being in the sea. They are always in the sea, they were born into the sea, into the water, and if they come out of the water they die. As fish spend their whole life swimming about in the water, for them, there is a 'given-ness' to the sea – it's taken for granted, and in being taken for granted it becomes invisible.

This is a position with which many mothers are familiar. When your children take you for granted, on the one hand that is a very high compliment – that you are part of the support services – but at the same time you see that you are invisible, just 'Mum'. The child makes up it's mind that Mum is 'just Mum' and is not really interested in Mum being anything else. It's only later, usually when they separate out from Mum, that children start to develop some gratitude and they're then able to think 'My mother did that for me.' In fact for many people, it's only when they themselves become parents that they realise what a schlep it is to do all of that, and they start to look back and think 'Oh, how much did I take for granted!'

Just as the sea is the 'ground of being' for the fishes so the ground of our being and the sphere of our operation is the openness of the mind. This is the dharmadatu or, in the language of the Prajnaparamita literature, this is

the Great Mother, the '*Yum Chenmo*', Prajnaparamita herself... and we have been swimming inside her womb for ever.

The text says very clearly that the only way to become a buddha is to be born within the womb of the Great Mother, to be born within emptiness. We are already in emptiness but we are in it with a particular kind of forgetfulness – in the same way as a child saying 'Mum, where's my socks?' is not seeing their mother. The mother is completely necessary for the child's existence and the child expects the mother to know the location of everything within its own world and yet takes her completely for granted.

So we are in emptiness now but we don't see it. Emptiness is providing everything we have, and we ourselves are of the nature of emptiness but we don't see it because we are moving inside it. The completion comes about when we see where we are because, going back to the example of the reflection in the mirror, when the reflection is seen as being inseparable from the mirror then the status of the reflection is changed. When we see that the image is *in* the mirror then it is seen to be a reflection rather than an entity.

If you can imagine cleaning your teeth in the morning and catching sight of your face in the mirror above the basin, in that moment you take the mirror for granted and it seems to you that you see your face, you don't see that it's a reflection. We don't stand there brushing our teeth for half an hour pondering in cosmic amazement at the nature of the mirror, we're just cleaning our teeth in a bit of a hurry so the function of the mirror to show the reflection is hidden from us. Because we don't see the mirror we don't see the image in the mirror as a reflection, we take for granted that it's going to show our face. It's an amazing thing that a polished surface, or nowadays

the silver coating on the back of a piece of glass, shows you your face in all its incredible detail; it is amazing but we don't see it.

In the same way the open spaciousness of the mind is hidden by our fixation on the forms of manifestation of our existence. We are ignoring something which is there, and we are able to do that because it continues to function whether we respect it or not – just as mothers have to continue taking care of their kids whether the kids are grateful or not, it just goes with the job.

The practice is about seeing what the mirror surface of the mind is. We already have some degree of clarity so, without thinking about it, we can look around the room and see many things. You can make your mind a little quiet so it's not full of thoughts then, as you turn your head to look around the room, many, many experiences are arising for you. Instantly and automatically the space of your being, the existential field in which you are operating, in is filling and emptying with these diverse appearances. This itself is the presencing of the mirror-like clarity of your mind – it's able to show what is there.

This 'showing' is hidden from us because we are interested in some things and not in others; we are looking for something. We enter the world with bias, with prejudice, and therefore we bring a distorted gaze into the entire field of experience. These biases arise because we are looking at entities, at things, at particular people, and we are thinking 'I like this person; I don't like that person' and so on – we are caught up in the 'person-ness' of the person we are seeing. They are existing as 'something', and there is always the question 'Do I want to bring them close to me or do I want to push them away from me? Where do I want to locate them in relation to me?'

This kind of thinking is quite solid. From this point of view, of being caught up in the details and wanting to make the world work to maintain the particular contouring of prejudice that we have, we don't see the fundamental clarity that's revealing the whole shebang. As everything comes at once there is a 'given-ness' *prior* to the judgement.

If you just tilt head and move your eyes quickly about the room you see all of these things. If you do it more slowly and look at the particular shapes of peoples' heads or the colourings of the walls and so on, some things will appeal to you more than others but once you get into that particular way of looking – 'Hmm, not very nice' or 'I really like that' then you can't see the whole thing.

Again, we could sit and look straight ahead at what is in the far distance and really focus on one particular thing. Then relax your gaze and sort of open it from the sides so you become aware of the peripheral vision then, move back to a particular focussed vision straight ahead of you. Now move back into more relaxed attention to the peripheral vision. What do you notice when you do that?

**Answers:** More space... It feels softer and more relaxed.

So it's as though most of our life is spent with blinkers on, looking down pre-set pathways of attention-seeking. We are seeking the attention of something, and hoping for something and we are also wanting to give our attention to the things we like and take it away from the things we don't like. This creates a convergent gaze – we are coming into a point and when that gaze gets merged with reification, with the creation of entities, and

furthermore with objectification in relation to people, we can easily start to see people as a means to an end.

When we want people to perform functions for us we are no longer in the same world as them. The experience of acting on the presence of the other to try and create something that we want is, I would suggest, very different from relating to them as inhabitants sharing the same space.

In the meditation we're going to do now we sit with our eyes open, gazing into the space in a relaxed way. Sometimes we begin by focussing on a white letter 'A' about two arms length in front of you. You can use either the tibetan symbol or an English capital A, maybe four inches high. The letter 'A' represents emptiness and it acts as a kind of hook to pull your attention into alignment. Then, from focussing on emptiness we release that fixation and the gaze opens into the space. In order to gather our dispersal together in order to be open, we make the sound of 'A' three times. 'A' is the most basic sound there is and all the other sounds are seen as a variation on the theme of 'A' so this is a way of allowing the various diverse vibrations moving in the body to align themselves on the basis of all sound.

### Not trying to catch anything...

When you are sitting, just sit, present with whatever is occurring. There might be sounds outside from cars going up and down, maybe some people in the room are moving, you might see something out of the corner of your eye – perhaps a person in the street, you feel sensations in your body, there are thoughts and feelings; all of this is arising and passing. Stay present with it.

Going back to the earlier question of 'Who is the one staying present with the arising and passing of experience?' This is not a question to enquire into in a logical way because all it will do is hook many, many thoughts but if we can stay present then it will show yourself.

If you find that there is some creature coming in and eating things in your kitchen, then the best thing is to sit quietly at night and watch. After a while, a little mouse will come out and run around you'll know 'Oh, it's a mouse. That's what it is.' If you run around the kitchen looking for the mouse, are you going to catch the mouse? No, mice have very good hearing; they can hear your heavy footsteps coming and they're gone. So you need to be very still, like an ornithologist waiting for a bird. They can't run around looking, looking, looking – they sit and wait, with hope, with confidence, with no particular agenda because it might be a very long wait and it might not go anywhere. That's a particular kind of waiting, isn't it? It's waiting in the satisfaction that waiting is worthwhile. This has a particular taste to it because it means that the waiting is not a means to an end, you're not trying to get something. Paradoxically of course, you *are* trying to get something but the more you evoke yourself as agent, the more that orientation will disrupt the field of activity and you won't see what's happening. It's waiting with a kind of alert passivity – a passivity which is alert in the sense of being able to register whatever is occurring.

So, we're sitting just 'open' and there's a car going by..... in hearing that noise, our mind might hook a whole series of thoughts – a particular kind of engine...trouble with the engine...the exhaust pipe's not very good – whatever kind of associations come, don't try to block them. We're not trying to stop having bad thoughts, nor trying to have very good or holy

thoughts, we just staying open; the space is open for whatever thoughts come.

This can be quite difficult at first because we're used to having a kind of intentionality, to trying to achieve something, but the foundation of this approach is that buddha-nature is already here. Awareness is primordial – there from the very beginning – and it is everybody's birthright. As the ground of our being it is always here with us. We're not trying to improve it, we're not trying to get it, it is here. Just as the fish is swimming in water so all our mental activity is illuminated by awareness. We don't see this because we are caught up in the thoughts but awareness is the ground of the very experience of having thoughts.

So we are going to put ourselves in the way of what is already there – waiting patiently like a bird-watcher who goes into the forest knowing that a rare bird lives there. There is nothing that the bird-watcher can do to make the bird appear, the forest is the world of the bird not the world of the ornithologist, but because the bird is in the forest sooner or later it will come.

### A different kind of getting...

It's not that you're going to get your real nature and find out who you really are because the ego can't get enlightenment. Once you get into getting, getting, getting, it never ends – 'Wow Mummy, look! I got these gold stars at school today, I spelled three words right.' 'Well done! Now you have ten thousand more words to learn to spell!' Here what you are trying to get is what you already have.

We all know how to go shopping. You go in, you look for what you want and then you pay the person – 'I would like this.' 'Okay, you can have it; give me your money.' But how do you buy what you've already got? That's more difficult. The one who is buying needs to not put their hand in their pocket – keep your purse zipped! Your resources which you use to get things in the world – your charm, your skill, your intelligence, your knowledge, your memory – all of these resources are useless because they are for getting things that you don't have. The issue now is to get what you have already got. This is a different kind of getting – it's like 'getting' a joke. When you 'get' a joke, you don't get anything, but you do 'get' the joke. It's like going to a chiropractor and getting yourself re-aligned; everything you need is already there but somehow it's not quite aligned, so you need to be clicked back into place.

The ego can't do this; the ego is not aware and it cannot become aware because it is revealed *through* awareness. So you can spend a lot of time in meditation trying to make yourself more bright and clear but the ego does not have the capacity to awaken. This is like going out in the middle of the day with your torch trying to illuminate things; it won't help you to see things more clearly. Because awakening is already there, being present with the natural clarity of the mind will reveal the natural clarity of mind. You can put your torch back in your pocket because the sun of awareness is shining!

So shall we do some practice. Sitting comfortably – the mouth can be slightly opened, the tongue on the upper palate, the gaze is slightly up, shoulders relaxed and open, the gaze resting in the space in the middle of the room – we make the sound of 'A' three times, just releasing the tensions of body, speech and mind and bringing the centre of our being into an

integration or alignment with the white letter 'A' which is emptiness or the ground nature of the mind of all the buddhas, of all the teachers.

That's a practice some of you know and you can do it in all sorts of circumstances. It's best, at first, not to do it for very long because you don't want to make it a matter of effort. It's really just finding the way to settle, which means there has to be a subtle 'dis-identification' with the thought that claims to be you.

### Habitual identifications...

We've all had some sorts of experiences in which some common behaviour or identification, which we've separated from either willingly or unwillingly, is now no longer available to us. You might have broken up in a relationship and dreamed about the person, or perhaps somebody asks about the person, and you feel a bit kind of confused, thinking 'I'm not with them, but I could be with them'. Or you might have given up smoking cigarettes so when somebody offers you a cigarette you say 'No' but you could also say 'Yes'. This is because although you've decided not to smoke, the habit of the identification with smoking is still there. In the same way the thought, which is a very subtle kind of thought – the feeling tone of 'this is happening to me' – is very tempting. It seems just right, it seems to be us, and yet if we stay calm that thought will vanish. These thoughts which have 'I' built into them don't apply to awareness. They apply to other thoughts which say 'I', such as 'I am tired' 'I am hungry' – these are all variations on a theme.

If you listen to the Goldberg Variations of Bach you will hear this played through the music – certain themes are repeated again and again but with endless variations. This basic motif of 'I am' is similar, you can pair so many

different things with it: 'I am male, I am female; I am this, I am that; I am young, I am old; I am tired; I am in work, I am not in work' – whatever the storyline would be, you can keep adding on and on to that. Every time we add something on to it, it creates a validation of the seeming essential reality or truth of 'I am'. It creates for us a felt sense that we are existing as something whereas what we are looking at here is the fact that the 'I am' is there but as the emptiness, or absence of an essence.

So 'I am' is like the emptiness of the mirror which, because it has no contents, can support infinite contents. It's not like the piece of bread that you can put endless toppings onto – there isn't an 'I am-ness' which exists as a thing. It's like the openness of the sky; clouds of many different formations can arise into the sky – subtle mist, heavy rain, storm clouds, rainbows and so on – and it is the empty open receptivity of the sky which allows for these different manifestations. When the clouds were in the sky you could say the sky is very grey, but it's the clouds which are grey not the sky. After a while the wind blows them away and the sky is open again.

So as meditators we are wanting to see the point where 'I am' gets filled with something else. If you see the empty 'I am' then you are open. That's not a linguistic statement; it's an actual experience: you are just open. You know it's you but this is not because of some interpretive thought or some reflective understanding or self-reflexive immediacy of 'this is happening to me'. If that happens just stay with it and it will vanish by itself. 'I am open' is just being open and within that openness many different thoughts and feelings arise.

**Comment:** Sometimes in meditation I noticed that thoughts just vanish and there is a feeling of spaciousness and emptiness but there is still an awareness of that and I don't know if awareness has to be deconstructed?

**James:** Talking about the operation of the mind is very difficult. We already have quite a complex vocabulary in English so we can have a notion of an 'observing self' or a 'watcher' or a 'witness' – the notion that if you are going to observe yourself you need to be far enough apart to see yourself. That kind of existence is inherently dualistic — there is a watcher and a watched, and there is an operation of watching. In the Tibetan tradition these are called the three circles: the subject, the object and what's binding them.

In meditation you tend to get a subtle form of the usual outer gross activity and because it is subtle it feels more light and spacious, however the basic dynamics of it are the same and the world is split into a subject part and an object part. Now, a mirror shows both subject and object, the mirror is not a subjectivity – awareness and consciousness are not the same. Talking about this is like the Tower of Babel because in different traditions these words are used in many different ways, but if we try to stay with the image of the mirror, as far as we know the mirror is not making any effort to show things. So the showing that happens in the mirror is non-intentional and non-effortful.

As an ego-self, whenever we do something, we tend to have quite a lot going on in the background. There's a subtle self-rectifying feedback-looping of judgement and interpretation about how we are doing. In its most simple form it's a kind of self-reflexivity where I know that I am the one performing the activity. So I know that I am raising and lowering my arm, I can see that this arm is going up and down but, on the inside, I know it's my

arm. Although that doesn't require any cognitive processing it does set up a 'this is happening in relation to me-ness' which is the dualistic split.

So, in that state, when we become aware of the 'watcher' if you like, without trying to change this in any way, stay with the one who is the watcher. In a sense it really means to stay as the watcher, but of course if you fully merge into it, you will just be it. In the Tibetan language they say *thog tu* which means 'on' so it's like saying 'stay on the point of that'.

### Staying on the point...

Just as you might say to someone who is giving up smoking cigarettes 'Stay on the point where your hand goes to pick up the cigarette, be with yourself just on that point.' In that moment you're not observing it, you're just 'Oh!', and the clarity in that moment is not something apart from it nor is it merged in it. In the instruction books they say: 'Don't push things away and don't merge into them.' Finding that subtle middle point is a hard thing to do because our tendency is to flip in these two directions but we just keep practicing that for a long time and gradually it gets a bit easier.

It's like if we imagine that this is a mirror in my hand and I hold up the mirror. As the mirror goes around the room, different parts of the room are coming into it. You could say that the mirror is staying with what is in front of it, but of course the term 'stay with' implies some degree of volition, some degree of intentionality. The mirror is not staying with what's in front of it; it is just showing what is in front of it, and that's a more simple, direct experience.

## Our mind shows us what is there

On a very simple level, just relax and look around the room and you see. In that moment of seeing it's not as if there's a 'looker' who is doing the seeing, there's just the seeing. It's that quality of seeing that is referred to when we 'stay with' something. It's not that 'I have to stay with it' because, again, that very intention brings the separation. If a Tibetan was talking about this he would say 'If you don't know what the taste of sweetness is, I could talk to you for a hundred years....but if I can put some sugar or honey on your tongue you would know what sweetness is.' The difficulty is that if we put too many words into the practice we end up sitting with lots and lots of words and trying to correct experience, but it's actually just sitting very simply.

At this time of the year the birds start singing so, if we go to the park or the garden, we can just sit in the evening with the birds making these wonderful cries. Let the mind just relax, very open, and the sound is just moving through it. It's that quality of receptivity – you're not listening, trying to hear the birds, but you're a space through which the sound of the birds is passing; that's at the heart of it. Awareness and space are inseparable which means that awareness doesn't have any shape whereas consciousness, because it takes an object, will have a shape.

If I am conscious of people walking by outside and I'm conscious of you that's different from awareness because, in a sense, we are in here *in something*, and they are doing something else *'out there'*. In this situation my mind goes there, and then my mind comes back here; when it was here, it was not quite there, and when it's there, it's not here. So consciousness has an intentionality to it – it's going towards something specific.

**Question:** Can consciousness and awareness overlap?

**James:** They are not two different things. Ultimately they are the same, but on an ordinary level they're not the same because consciousness is the movement of the energy of awareness which is always caught up in an object. So going back to the example of watching something which is happening in your mind, you've now got a split situation where 'I'm conscious of what's happening'. Awareness is a different kind of experience, it's like maybe on a beautiful summer day you go for a walk and lie down in a field of flowers. You are just there and you hear some bees – zzzz...zzz...zz – looking up there are some clouds, you are not in charge – you are deeply on holiday. The world is going on by itself and you are just part of the world; it's that kind of quality. You are present but you're not actively present because you're not trying to do anything, you are just there. It's that 'just-here-ness' that we want to bring into the meditation but actually we can't *bring* it because on that beautiful summer's day, it just happened. You are just walking, and you're tired and you think 'This looks nice, this is lovely. Ahhh....'.

So when we feel... 'this fucking head...all these thoughts, all this stuff I have to remember!' we do the three 'A' meditation and we just cut it off – 'pppt' then it's 'A'aaaah – nice!'

**Question:** When I was practising I realised that I was trying to get into that state and I wondered whether that was making it more difficult?

**James:** It's a very important question. It's something which arises a lot in couple therapy, especially when one person has been out at work and the other person has been at home all day. When the person who has been out

all day crosses the threshold the person who has been at home all day often wants some attention but the person who has been out all day is thinking 'I've had it up to here' and you get a kind of mismatch. When you start in the meditation, if you think 'I've been working all day but now I'll do a little bit of practice' you are starting from an agitated position. It takes a while to settle, and if you start looking before you settle the the looking just creates even more turbulence. At a certain point you can, in a sense, have a conversation about starting up the enquiry. So it's about getting to know for yourself what is the feeling tone where you open to that particular kind of availability – where you are available to yourself for enquiry into yourself. If it's cranked up into a kind of demand, or another task, and you've had a whole day full of tasks then you're probably going to miss it because you are cranked up at too high a revolution.

## The open mind

Imagine you've got a club and your club is in a rough part of town – I'm sure in a delightful city like this, there are no such rough parts – but in our imagination we imagine a rough part of town. It's Saturday night and on the door of your club you have a couple of bouncers; they are keeping the people in the club safe. If you don't have any bouncers on the door the best thing is to have no back wall in the club so when the bad people come in you can throw them out the back! This is meditation – we have no bouncers for our mind.

You can decide '*I will not smoke*'; you can decide '*I will eat less*'; these are activities 'out in the world' so you have some choice about what you do. But you have very little choice about what arrives in your mind; there are no

bouncers, whatever arises is in the club already. 'What are you doing?' 'Lovely day! Sunshine!' 'Whoa, this is crazy! Why am I here?' 'What's the meaning of life?' What can you do with a thought like that? Well, because the mind has no back wall and is just open, you don't need a bouncer, the thought will go by itself. But if you decide 'I'm not going to have thoughts like this in my head' then you've just tapped the big guy on the shoulder and he's turning round, 'Yes?', and then you're into something.

This is where impermanence becomes central to meditation practice – you look externally and you look internally and everything is always changing. If you really believe that then you don't need to move things around; if you don't take them too seriously they will go by themselves.

Clearly, although we have our mind, there's a kind of double move or paradox because although it is 'our mind' we don't have that much control over it. It's like if you have children, although they're your children you don't have much control. If people say 'why don't you control your children' you say 'well they're children' and it's the same with your mind, it will have a life of its own. Under safe circumstances – in meditation – if you allow it to just run free then you really develop the confidence that everything which arises in the mind will go, and if it's going by itself you don't need to be so worried.

It's useful to become aware of the kind of thoughts you have which really upset you; what are the occupants of your mind that you feel to be an intrusion? These probably have some psychological importance for you in terms of your image of who you are, in terms of the profile that you like to maintain, or your aspiration about how you should be. There are probably

some thoughts and feelings and sensations which arise but don't belong inside that profile; these are probably the ones you want to get rid of.

Then we can ask '*What harm will these thoughts do?*' and there are two clear answers. On the one hand, on the level of being an ego, they will cause trouble because the ego is soft and malleable and these thoughts will press into it and bring about a reaction. On the other, on the level of awareness, they won't leave any mark. They're like the images in a mirror as we turn it around, they come into it and go out of it but the mirror itself is traceless just like the sky. Nothing leaves a trace in the sky, a plane might go across it and you see those white lines but after five minutes they've just dissolved away.

You can use this diagnostically when you feel contaminated by something which has arisen inside you. If this happens it is a sign that you, as an ego-self – a little nexus of self-identificatory activity – are the one who is standing in relation to the thought. In that kind of defending yourselves against something you feel a frisson – the energy of 'Oh it couldn't be me; I don't want anyone to know that.' This is business as usual; in the dualistic way of being a person in the world you are always going to be affected. However, awareness is not affected, so the task is just to relax out of that thought, forget it. Let it come as it comes, just open to it and think 'I am a liar, I am a cheat, I'm a useless person, I'm a hopeless person. In my previous lives I have killed many people.' You can think of every bad thing that anyone has ever done and say 'Me too! I'm a complete waste of fucking space, I'm crap.' Then, when someone says 'You're crap!' you can say 'I already told you. Ha! ha! ha!'

## I will not become enlightened!

The ego cannot become enlightened. You can get confused again and again over this point so it's very important to know that you will never be enlightened.

I like my feet very much, but they will never be my hands. Sometimes you get Christmas cards painted by people with their feet but, generally speaking, unless I have a terrible accident, my feet are my feet and my hands are my hands. To ask my feet to be my hands would be very crazy; to ask the ego to be something that cannot be is abuse – ego-abuse!

In family therapy there is what we refer as 'the parental child'. This is where the child has been expected, in the family dynamics, to take on the responsibility of the delinquent parents. Spiritually, you get a lot of this kind of ego-abuse – you get the kind of enlightened ego, the parental ego, but it always leads to a collapse because it's just playing. The ego can't be enlightened, it doesn't have the resources and it doesn't have the power – but it does have the aspiration. When the ego says to you 'you should do some practice, you need to do this' that's the longing for integration; but the basis of the integration is already there.

This is why in later Indian buddhist traditions and the Tibetan tradition we say that there are only three unchanging or indestructible moments, or things in the world: there is the sky, there is enlightenment, and there is the moment of enlightenment.

Yesterday I came from London to Macclesfield. When I entered Macclesfield there was a point prior to that where I was not in Macclesfield and then there

was a point where I was in Macclesfield. So there was a transition point and that transition point was in time; at about a quarter to ten this morning I went from one state to another. Both 'being in Macclesfield' and 'not being in Macclesfield' exist in the same class of phenomena but enlightenment and not-enlightenment are not the same class of phenomena. Here you have incommensurables – two things which cannot be compared – being compared: 'I will become enlightened' 'Now I am enlightened.' *Oh no, you're not!*

This is why the moment of enlightenment is one of the infinite or indestructible points. Enlightenment is infinite and eternal, as is the moment of enlightenment – so we are always already becoming enlightened. If you were to *become* enlightened you would have had a transition from not being enlightened to being enlightened and I, the unenlightened one, would suddenly be enlightened...but actually nothing much changes.

As a child you can probably remember having fantasies like 'When I'm big I'm going to get a bicycle, when I'm older I'm going to do this, or get that.' then, when you get these things, somehow life is just the same. 'Maybe I can kiss that girl?' and then you kiss the girl and it's very nice, but life goes on, you still have homework to do. All these points which seem to be so absolutely final that 'when they happen my whole life will be changed' are found to be not really like that because we're moving in the same domain – the ego gets 'ego-kind of' experiences.

That which is permanent is enlightenment and the moment of enlightenment. This means that enlightenment is not something that is in front of you, nor is it something behind you, it is something that you are

moving in, like the fish in the sea. This is difficult for us to understand because our lives are so structured around competition and getting somewhere; around making things happen – arranging someone's birthday party or planning for retirement or doing something for some purpose – a means to an end. But the end, the great end of natural perfection, has already happened – it's here.

The question is not 'When is enlightenment?' the question is 'Where are we?' If we find out where we are, we'll find that we are in that state of enlightenment.

When we refer to these three things, the sky, enlightenment and the moment of becoming enlightenment, as unchanging or indestructible this is simply a philosophical way of saying that that moment is infinite – you cannot enter into it.

We are supported by many things which are there but which we are not consciously attending to. For example, if I'm here talking to you, I've forgotten my back because I'm looking out at you. I'm pretty sure, now that I stop to think about it, that it's there but functionally it's not there when my attention is out towards you. So it is there but it's not in my consciousness however when I return my attention to it, it is there. My back didn't go anywhere, it just wasn't there for me.

In the same way, our enlightenment hasn't gone anywhere else but it hasn't been there for us because we haven't been attending to it. We have been attending to something else – attending to the busyness of life; thinking about what to do in the springtime, tidying the house or getting new curtains – however we spend our time. Being busy about all of these things is being

like a busy fish in the sea – swimming up, swimming down, swimming, swimming, round and round. 'Where is the fish?' It's in the sea. 'What does the fish think it's doing?'... What's for tea?...It's like that, we are so busy, we don't see it, that's all.

The purpose of the practice is not to stop the busyness, because you can't do that, but to stop being merged in the busyness, addicted to it. Then, instead of collapsing into the phenomena that are arising, the clarity of the mind is allowed just to reveal everything. Then it becomes easier.

**Question:** Isn't an act of compassion needed here – a deep understanding of letting yourself be who you are ... just another little pulse .....

**James:** Absolutely. One of the things we read about a lot is that many people who are in prison continue to deny that they committed a crime. 'I'm in prison, I'm surrounded by criminals but *I'm* not a criminal.' We know that the courts are not always efficient, but probably most people who are in prison have committed a crime of some kind. The buddha said 'This is samsara'. You are in the human realm and you get into the human realm by pride and desire plus you have a lot of karma. If that's the case, why are we surprised that we make lots of mistakes?

I take your point that we can deal with it by compassion, but why do we imagine that we wouldn't have done it in the first place? Compassion would help to dissolve the defensiveness, but why are we defending ourselves against being in the swamp of samsara? (sniffs) '*Smells bad,huh?*'...Yes, it's called samsara...'No, but it smells bad!'...Yes, it's samsara...'No, but it smells bad; it shouldn't smell bad!'...It smells like shit! It is really, really bad!

You look at what the government is doing in Syria. Our brave Foreign Secretary is again saying 'They shouldn't do that!' – that's really, really helpful to the people in Homs; they feel held and nurtured! This is insane! This realm is not the Garden of Eden, it really is not a nice place. So towards ourselves, we should expect our minds to be full of all kinds of crap – jealousy, pride, confusion, and so on, and not be insulted by it because that's the entry ticket to this realm, it's why we're here.

When we have that sort of 'I'm not bad, I'm a nice sort of person' kind of thought, then we need to operate compassion to make it easier. First of all, to make it easy – and this is one of the great heuristic values of thinking – we can say: 'Any kind of crap that any human being or any being anywhere in the universe can do, I have probably done in my previous lives.' So all of these possibilities can run through me at any time. Whether it's a murderous thought, a sexually perverse thought, a jealous thought, a generous thought – any kind of stuff – just let it come and go, not making it personal. If it does become personal then, indeed, having that kind of meta-attitude is helpful, but it is easier if first of all if we can say 'let it come' because it will!

### Relating to the experience of emptiness

The general analytic method is the first of the three different methods of relating to the experience of emptiness but all three methods are concerned with the issue of how to feel safe in a changing world.

As we looked yesterday, many events happen which lead us into states of confusion which sometimes results in anxiety or withdrawal and we often have a fantasy of wanting to be in control of life. When we are controlling something we have a sense that it's under our power and we are in charge.

We are, as it were, 'the big one' and the issue or person that's being dealt with is 'the small one'; so big and small is a very useful way of thinking about things.

In the tantric tradition many of you will be familiar with meditation on very powerful and wrathful deities, there is a great stress on being in control. We hear stories about Padmasambhava coming to Tibet and putting the local gods under his power. That is an active form of engagement and whatever you control can escape your control. It is still a dualistic way of thinking about the world and, as with any situation which you are trying to control, you have to pay attention and devote a lot of energy to it. If you are driving a car you have to control the steering wheel, the accelerator, the brakes and so on; you are 'on the job' and you are being bound back into a particular state of relationship.

### Infinity of buddha-nature

At the heart of the dharma is the notion that all beings have buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is not an entity; it's not a small thing, it is itself infinite. In a sense 'finite' means something describable; something which has a shape, a beginning and an end, a certain length, height, colour and weight and with this information you can come to a definite conclusion about what it is. This kind of information can be applied to concrete forms in the world and also to abstract categories.

A great deal of the structuring of life is based around competition for finite resources. This is what competitive sport is all about: there can only be one team that wins the league, only one champion at Wimbledon. Many people are contending for a limited resource and this is the reason why finite

structures tend towards conflict. It is always the issue between companies searching for oil — there is clearly a limited amount of that resource and the company, or especially the country, which can control that resource puts itself in a very powerful position. The likelihood of Putin being re-elected in Russia rests very much on the supplies of natural gas which are available to bankroll his schemes.

We often feel finite — that's our normal sense of ego-self. We know that we were born, we know that we're going to die, that we are a particular height and weight and that we've got some skills but not others, so we can define ourselves. If we are defining ourselves and showing ourselves, this can feel quite empowering. However because of feeling finite if somebody else catches us and puts us on the spot then we feel exposed – this is a rather different feeling! It's the basis of shame reaction, where suddenly somebody's got our number and they know what we're up to. There's nowhere to hide and we feel very, very small.

We know that totalitarian regimes use a lot of their resources to make their population feel small. Putting fear into people is an enormously powerful and useful method if you want to control them. Much European literature George Orwell, Kafka and so on describes very tellingly what that structure is and what it's like. Every night we can see on the news countries where people are being intimidated and fear becomes an internalised corrective. The threat of torture or the threat of rape which operates in many cultures makes people afraid to act. The feeling is that there are these big forces around us so 'What will happen if we do that?' We have these predictions and trajectories of our hopes and fears, and we want to protect ourselves. When we experience ourselves as small and finite we are really quite

vulnerable. Dharma understanding, especially in relation to emptiness, offers us the chance of directly experiencing ourselves as infinite. Infinite doesn't mean something abstract or mystical, but rather to see that in each moment of particular consciousness, in each moment of having an experience the 'experiencer itself' is not a thing. The moment of experience that arises – feeling wet from the rain, or cold or tired or excited – that particularisation is finite, it's not going to last forever; it's arising due to causes and circumstances.

However the experience of the finite moment is itself infinite. This stands in relation to the image of the mirror we looked at yesterday – the finite is contained within the infinite. It's not two back-to-back qualities; it's not that either something is infinite or it's finite. The notion of non-duality which is central to all the mahayana teachings means that every limited form is itself within the unlimited; you don't have to leave the limited to get to the unlimited. The limited is already inside, or inseparable from, the unlimited or the infinite.

When we have an experience of the basis of our existence – of our buddha nature, our natural being, or the mind itself – as infinite, then we have a huge freedom because nothing can catch the infinite. Whatever is going to do the catching will itself have a shape and a form, it's attempting to wrap itself around something so it will have a capacity. But the infinite is elusive in that sense; you can never catch it. This explains why you can't get enlightenment – it's not a thing to get, it's a quality of existence you can relax into.

In trying to talk of this we have many problems because if you use a word like 'existence' or 'being' in the buddhist tradition there are a lot of critiques

of this kind of concept, as there are for the word 'mind'. Although we are gesturing beyond the meaning of language we have to use language to do this. Language is based, essentially, on the experience of finite transactions and it works in terms of comparing and contrasting, setting one thing in relation to another, so it's about linking. That experience of openness – the infinite – is beyond conceptualisation, but although we can't 'get it' this doesn't mean it's something of which we can't partake.

The key move in our experience is to shift out of grasping and appropriation into a sense of being with what is already there. It's about letting go of the sort of agglutinative sense – the sense that you can glue different aspects together and build up a composite picture. Essentially, it's about clearing away rather than accumulation. Although we often perhaps feel a little lacking, a little unworthy or not knowing, or confused, and we feel the need to develop more qualities to build ourselves up so we can understand this stuff, that actually takes us in the wrong direction because there is no end to learning.

The issue is much more to attend to the way in which we cover up what is already there by believing that, in order to arrive at where we want to go, we need to be different from how we are now,

Essentially, where we want to go is where we already are – especially in these times of this modernist project 'Into the future, into the future'. One of the candidates in the republican party in America is determined to build the first permanent station on the moon as a basis for further space exploration... beautiful!...there are a lot of crazy people in the world! The American economy is not doing too well, there are a lot of problems for the American

people, even in terms of getting food and medical care, but somebody can have a project like that – a kind of narcissistic fantasy – and he can hook people's hopes so much they get carried away.

This happens because of our tendency to imagine that 'somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, there's this land that I dreamed of once in a lullaby'. You can call it 'Dewachen' or 'Zangdropalri', but it's somewhere else – 'When I get enlightened.' It's like when you are a child you think 'When I grow up, I'm going to go to bed when I want, and I'll eat everything that I like, and I'll never eat vegetables again.'

What we're trying to do is drop the tendency to feel that we have to improve something. Why are you trying to improve something when you don't know what you've got? So the function of the meditation and the analysis is to look at what is occurring now and to see directly that the way in which when you see yourself, or you see other people, it is 'through a glass darkly'. It's through the veil and screen of your assumptions, your prejudices, your interpretive categories.

So why do we believe that these are true? We live now in a multi-cultural society, alongside people from different backgrounds, and we see that their assumptions about the world are different from ours. People often like to go to other cultures for their holidays, just for that reason – to taste different kinds of cooking, see people going about their daily life in ways that are not like ours.

This brings into focus one of the most important basic methods we have – that of relativisation. When we see that 'I do this, but if I had been born into

another culture I wouldn't be doing this' we are seeing that the reason why 'I do this' is due to causes and circumstances.

## Analysis of emptiness

We'll look a little bit now at this analytic way of understanding emptiness. Primarily it's based on the notion of dependent co-origination, which all the buddhist schools attend to in various ways. The simple formulation of it is '*on the basis of this, that arises*'. This is saying that whatever we see as a phenomenon – whether it's a thought in our mind or external objects or the shape of our body – whatever we see as something which is manifesting is a form which arises due to causes and conditions. The more we practice seeing in that way, the more we see that there is no inherent self-nature in anything. The key to that practice is to look always for the invisible lines that are behind the phenomenon.

I can remember, as a teenager, starting to read the newspaper. My dad would have a newspaper every day, in our house we got the Glasgow Herald, and my dad, who worked in a bank, would read that and I would be reading it too. Gradually he explained to me: 'I read this newspaper because I work in a bank. The politics of this newspaper are right-wing; my politics are not right-wing but I read this because I work in a bank and the customers who come into the bank are going to have these views. The function of the newspaper is to connect myself, as a bank manager, with the people who are the customers. Newspapers don't tell the truth, they tell biased stories which express the views of the owners of the newspaper.'

To a teenager, that's really quite shocking. You've been trying to read your French grammar and your history books, and you suddenly realise these

things aren't true at all, the whole damn thing's a con because people have different ideas.

You know, in Scotland, you grew up saying 'we have the best education system in the world' but it's a lie. When we went to university, in the first year sitting in a seminar, people are talking and who are the people who are talking? – English people. The Scottish people couldn't open their mouths because they'd had a completely repressive, barbarian education, being belted black and blue and shouted at by teachers. So, all the Scottish people are sitting very upright, trying to get it right, but at university there's no way to get it right – you have to express your opinion. 'How can I have an opinion? I don't want to get it wrong.' 'Fuck, this is weird! This is dreadful!' These things are quite shocking; suddenly see the world seems very frightening. Things which seemed to be self-existing on their own terms, offering us the possibility of a simply progression – '*If I do this, then I'll get there*' – are not like that at all.

This is a great realm of wheeling and dealing and to be a bit street-wise is better than having lots of academic qualifications, because if you're street-wise you see how it works – and generally it works as a scam.

When you look at our politicians, they're not the 'brightest and best' but they are people who've got a nose for power and, through various back-door alliances and so on, they get into these positions.

So dependent co-origination means not being naïve but looking to see how things actually function. This means confronting the bit of us that wants to be stupid, that wants to be a bit of a mug, that wants to be a sucker.

Sometimes, if you've had a hard day you come home and what you want is some nonsense film on the telly, some romantic comedy where you can just sit there and Tom Hanks is doing something... ha-ha! There's no challenge in that at all, it's just very predictable and completely stupid but it's like a balm for the soul. We want to be taken in because it provides the notion of an orderly, regular progression. That's the force of stupidity, of mental dullness – one of the root poisons that we have to struggle with. It's the sort of torpor, the entropy of the mind, the bleeding away of fresh vital connectedness to a state where we want to hear lullabies and know that everything's ok and life will just go on, and then you die, but it wasn't so bad. Just like the sheep in the field...

Unfortunately, here we are on a Sunday morning, not lying in bed but thinking about dharma, and dharma says 'Better to be awake.' But awake to what? Awake to how stupid we are; awake to our own tendencies to not struggle to be fresh – to get carried away. Whether it's when you're sitting in meditation and being carried away by thoughts, or whether it's outside interacting with other people and being carried away by well established prejudices and assumptions and so on. What we want to do is to see ourselves in the process of our unfolding, and to see how this operates – to see how the self, as a construct, formulates itself in relation to different circumstances.

When you are able to see that process, it's not then a matter of making no movement at all. Some kinds of discipline, for example monastic discipline, are about reducing the number of variables so that you can see more clearly what's going on. If you don't live in a monastic environment your social interactions are likely to be much less choreographed, much less ritualised

and therefore you're going to be evoked and provoked by circumstances into particular ways of responding. If you see the basis of that response, the real basis of it, then it becomes possible to manifest it as a quality of compassion.

For instance, we can all experience that when we are speaking to babies or old people or busy people or people who are resting, we speak in different ways. Also we can experience how the mood in an environment can affect us. A mood shows you a kind of image of yourself, it shows what you are at ease with and what you are not at ease with.

For example, if I go into a shop like Marks & Spencer's and I want to buy a shirt it's quite straightforward. If I were to go into a very fancy boutique that would be more difficult because the people look at you as if asking 'Are you actually entitled to enter our shop? Why are you wearing trousers like that? Please go away!' You can feel a sort of frostiness in the air – that you would need to be perfectly dressed before you went into the shop in order to buy more clothes to be perfectly dressed – 'crumpled people need not apply.' Being professionally crumpled myself, I can feel that vibe in the air. Now that may be my paranoid projection but I do think it exists; as soon as you cross the threshold something in the air creates a freedom or a non-freedom to speak, to be at ease, to be yourself or not.

It's very interesting to observe how the different environments we enter into bring about a mood of expansion or contraction. Seeing that 'who I am' is called into being by different circumstances and just noticing that again and again, really brings us to the heart of dependent co-origination. I am formulated moment by moment; I come into form according to the environment and the environment comes through perception, through

sensitivity to mood, through state of health, time of day, there are many, many variables. Just start to be very curious and you will observe these for yourself, and through that you can start to see the dynamic nature of our being. This is not a dogma – you don't have to believe in it – but if you look, you will see it.

We can also then see how being open to this ever-unfolding fresh dimension can feel a bit exhausting. We have a tendency to want life to be predictable so a feeling of 'I've had enough!' arises and with that: anger, heaviness of mind, darkness or entropy, and a sinking-away. This is the function of attachment and this function, to grasp into an assumption and wrap it around us, is always going to be available. So from the point of view of analysis we need to have a curiosity and a desire to see 'how does the world work?'

### How does the world work?

We can see that something like the NHS is very politically driven. The healthcare of people – for example, whether they are given operations or not – is determined by political decisions. You can't escape power. It's the same in education – the training of teachers, the number of teachers we have in the schools, the size of the classes and so on, whether you have supply teachers or permanent posts – all of these are political decisions. When a school tries to sack its older teachers and recruit younger ones because that's cheaper, that is a political budget decision.

The more we look, the more we see that there are no fixed things at all. Our world is constantly manifesting according to causes and circumstances. When we walked through the streets in Macclesfield yesterday we could see so many shops that are empty. This speaks of something: the mood of the town is a little bit collapsed because the economy is not very strong, and because the economy is not very strong and this mood is there, it's not likely to attract many more people into thinking 'Hey, this is a growing market.' This then creates a sense of hopelessness and decline as one thing leads to another. Of course, in the nineteen sixties and seventies many of the northern cloth-producing towns went into decline and it was only by large-

scale immigration that the mood shifted at all. From this we can see that international cotton prices and silk production methods influence what arises and what doesn't.

This helps us to see why it is that when I develop an intention, when I try to make my life go the way I want it to, I get thwarted. It's because the world is complicated, and it's always going to be like that, so having a simple direction to carry through is almost impossible.

Remember the rhetoric before the war in Iraq. There was this idea that we're going to go in there, and we're going to sort it out, and life will be better – 'Saddam cannot continue; he's a very dangerous person!' Then, at the end of the first year it was utter chaos – no water supplies in Baghdad, no electricity, sewage everywhere, snipers on the roofs. Where's the clarity of intention at that point? It's vanished because, of course, it's a complex situation and if it's complex, you can't know in advance what's going to happen. So the people who tell us 'Don't worry, we're in charge.' are professional liars. Why do we vote for them? – Because we want life to be simple. But life is complicated so that attitude makes us stupid. I'm afraid that's how it is; that's the buddha's teaching. It's not honey-sweet but I think we all know that it's true.

Being carried away by visions that life should be easy leads you into great trouble. Part of the economic crash was due to mis-selling of mortgages in America, where people with no money were being offered a hundred and twenty percent mortgages on a house, which they couldn't repay. These kinds of economic bubbles have happened often in history – the South Sea bubble, the Dutch tulip bulb bubble, and many others – because people get caught up in events.

If you think of the rise of communism and its movements in the 1910's 20's 30's 40's and 50's, people believed in this. They thought that if you have a society based on fairness and on equal opportunities, that would really be good and that everyone would do well.' Then the truth of what was going on under Stalin comes out – so many millions of people died. How could that happen?

Well, if you've got a simple view of the world and you want to impose a simple view onto it, then you're going to end up with violence. Something terrible will happen because the world is complicated.

So for example, 'The peasants are good and the landowners are bad so kill all the landowners and give the land to the peasants!' but the peasants don't know how to run a farm, so we have a problem. It's like this in Zimbabwe just now with the agricultural situation and incredible inflation. Simple solutions don't work because life is complicated – this is at the heart of dependent co-origination.

The focus on action, and change, and management, and making things happen is very much the discourse of modern life. There are more and more managers everywhere – micro-management, controlling all the variables – at the end of the day, what do you get? Nothing but shit, because it doesn't work!

How much money does the Ministry of Defence make? We're going to buy these new tanks and it's going to cost ten billion pounds, then after five years, it costs thirty billion pounds and then .... where did all the money go? Where did all these scams come from? '*Production.*' These glib one-liners! Whose money is that? – It's our money! People don't know what they're

doing; we cut down the Amazon rain forests, and everywhere you go you see human beings caught up in hubris – imagining that 'we're in charge, we know what's good', marching ahead.

The best thing for human beings to do is sit on their hands; don't do very much at all, and just observe. If you observe, as children are taught then you 'look before you leap' but if you *really* look, why would you leap? Because it's complicated; the world is like a minefield and we don't know where the mines are.

### Assumptions and conclusions

So, in analysing dependent co-origination we want to see how, whenever you identify a phenomenon – whether it's a new person that you meet, a new restaurant that you go to, a new job or when the kids have a new teacher, whatever the situation may be – when you see it for the first time, observe how you want to come to a conclusion about it. Maybe when you talk to your kid's teacher and you think 'Ah, that'll be ok!', what's in play there? You feel 'Oh, that's fine!' but then check: 'What am I doing? Am I really looking? Are there lots of questions I didn't ask and why didn't I ask them? Is it because I'm frightened to ask them, or I want them to like me, or I don't believe I would get an honest answer?' Can we really check things out? Can we see what we are buying into? That's a very essential part of looking.

We can look at this place. Some of us met together a while ago and we were thinking about the ending of this dharma centre, but now we're back again and it looks pretty much the same. This is due to the basic kindness of the person who is the owner here, Chris, who continues to keep an eye on

what's going on and is in favour of the ethical use of this building. It is due to the energy of the people who are involved in the maintenance and who are being thoughtful about continuity – Sue, Anne, Barbara, Gisela, Kath, Mags and so on – people who come together and think 'How can we make this environment flourish?' Without that effort we wouldn't be meeting here today. This is not self-existing; somebody had to work out how to bring some chairs in and so on.

Everything is a construct. Each person can *think* 'What is it that brings me here? What are the factors from my childhood, my current life? Had I heard something about dharma, had I read a book, or had somebody mentioned something?' – and we see these little winds that blow across our lives and suddenly we find ourselves moving in a particular direction. It wasn't a clear intention arising out of us but it just sort of happened, and we find ourselves in this place.

The more we look we see there is no solid substance or self-essence at the heart of anything that we are involved in. What we have are forms manifesting as the expression of the interaction of the meeting of complex vectors. These vectors are force fields of intention and habit and mental formations suffused with emotion.

So a dharma place like this arises because of particular kinds of intention; these intentions need to meet a material basis which will allow for some continuity. That may shift and we may never meet here again, but while it's happening we can think 'Oh, we're just here.' But this 'just-here-ness' is dynamic.

Impermanence, which we looked at earlier, link with this. So dependent co-origination is the moving together impermanent, or in another language dynamic, features. There is nothing stable in our world at all; our world is the manifestation of patterning – patterning which is intrinsic.

When we are wanting to control things, we are often trying to adjust and change patterns and customise them to our own prejudices and tendencies. But this world is nothing but pattern; pattern is how things manifest, they don't manifest as chaos.

### No fixed entity exists

If we want to see the illusory nature of things, we can look at that being in this room together. On one level it's full of quite solid, concrete substances which don't seem to be an illusion, but their presence here and our experience of them are inseparable. What is here is revealed to us by our particular orientation. We are not seeing our statue rather, the experience of our statue is co-emergent with our participation. That is to say that how you participate with the statue reveals that statue for you. This is where we have to look again and again at whether we think there is a statue; do we think that everybody's looking at the same statue and it's just that we have different opinions about it? That's one view and it's our normal view but is that really true? What is this real statue that we all have all have opinions about?

We can go back to Plato's notion of ideals – that in this world we all perceive things according to our prejudices but in the 'perfect realm' we would see things very clearly. We could look at his image of the cave where it's as though we are living in a cave with no access to what's outside. All we see is

shadows flickering on the wall and our interpretation of what's going on is based on these.

The buddhist view would be different; it would say that there is no fixed entity at all. If you imagine that there is a self-existing statue, that is erroneous because the statue which we see, and which you can lift up and take away, is here on a table. If you lift it up you would find it was quite heavy so you would want to put it down. You'd then have to work out *where* to put the statue down, because the statue is always somewhere. That is dependent co-origination.

For example, here is a metal representation of a stupa, it's quite nice. I looked yesterday and the top of it has been flattened; it's had a little accident. Because it's metal, if you try to straighten it with pliers it's likely to break off, so there's a problem. How could this have happened? Quite clearly somebody has sat on it or they've packed it in a particular way and it's got clubbed – so it's not self-existing.

What is actually there is experience, but we are addicted to seeing 'things'. You cannot see a thing; what we call 'seeing' is a particular kind of experience, what we call touching is a particular kind of experience.

If I pick this up I feel the heaviness of it; I feel the muscles in my arm having to tense to support the weight of the object. 'This feels real.' Why does it feel real?...because I wouldn't like to be hit with it! That's very basic; we learn that as a kid don't we? When you fall out of a tree or somebody pushes you off your bicycle or somebody thumps you in the playground, you realise that 'Ouch' is linked with 'I don't want to be hurt.' So my self-protectiveness has me scanning the environment for danger; we do this all

the time. When we look at the environment, we're looking primarily for two things – danger and sex; this is the hard wiring of the human condition.

So, if something is heavy it could have an impact on me; somebody could pick it up and hit me with it and if I dropped it on my foot it could break my bones. So it follows that the solidity of the statue stands in relation to the nature of this soft body... do you have a sense of that?

When you see a car driving down the road, if that car came off the road and on to the pavement and hit you, you would end up severely injured. So the relation to each of these objects is through myself. If the car is being driven well and I have no anxiety about it I feel relaxed, but if you are in a car on a motorway and somebody's coming up to overtake you, and it looks as if they're swerving across the line, how does the body feel? Something is being communicated isn't it? – that something bad could happen, that this is not safe. So that object, if it was being driven well, wouldn't be producing this effect; this shows that how we make sense of a car is very much in terms of 'do I need to attend to it or not?'

If you are interested in the five *skandas*, this takes us back to feeling tone, to the *vedana*; is it positive, neutral or negative? Most of the time that you are driving cars are just kind of neutral, but if somebody's driving very badly it's immediately negative and that feeling tone of anxiety is registering for us.

We may well come to some judgement and think ' Arsehole!' and on the basis of that, we now know 'this is a bad driver'. But what's actually occurring is the movement of an object at speed, in an irregular pattern. If you are the driver you have to negotiate to make sure that that irregularly moving object doesn't crash into you, but out of our fear we are likely to

make some pejorative judgement of them 'This idiot is dangerous or bad. He shouldn't be allowed to drive' and so on. In that you see the concretisation of something that's actually just a sort of a movement, if you avoid the accident it just goes by. However, a lot of the time people concretise themselves; they come to a very fixed judgement because 'I am in danger.'

## The nature of embodiment

So one of the key things we have to start to observe is 'What is the nature of embodiment?' For as long as we have a primary attachment to the body, a body which is finite, then we know that we get sick and that as we get older we don't have so much health or capacity to maintain focussed attention and we know that we're going to die.

The prime period of our life probably runs from thirty-five to sixty. Up to the age of thirty-five most people, psychologically, are a bit 'all-over-the-place', so life's a bit chaotic. Then you start to settle down and your life takes on a bit of a shape. By the time you are getting to sixty, you are starting to have these 'senior moments' where you lose words and you can't remember the spelling of something. The brain is starting to dissolve back into the primordial treacle and you start to think of the past... 'When I used to ....' 'In my day...' – and it's fading away. That's actually not a very long time – a period of about twenty-five years in which to be clear. After that period, with diminishing capacity, you can still do things, but there are many things that become more difficult to do. That's a fact of our existence.

We are often surprised as we get older 'Oh, my hip's sore'. 'Getting up in the morning's more difficult, I wonder why?' *You're getting old.* 'But I don't feel old.' *But you are old* 'I don't want to be old.' *Well you are old!*

We develop this map in our head about who we are, and we don't change it. Exploration of the nature of ageing is one of the huge horizons spreading out in this and many other cultures because the population is ageing more and more, often with a fair degree of health. So, what is it like to age? What is it like to become 'less than', to mourn the loss, to live in a state of grief at missed opportunity, and then what to do with that? It's a terrible thing to mourn a loss if there's nothing you can do about it. We're very fortunate in terms of dharma because it always gives us something to do. No matter how painful the experience, if you see that many years of your life have just passed, running around from place to place, and you'll never get these years it again that bitter taste can be very useful. It is a reminder 'I'd better start paying attention now. What will I attend to, what really has value ?'

But then there are also all these hooks, like the siren's song carrying us off – 'I could do this... and there are so many movies haven't seen and novels I haven't read; I haven't travelled to this country or that country.' Are these things important? If we say 'Yes', then the question has to be 'How will I read the novel?' 'How will I look at the movie?' 'How will I go to that foreign country?' 'Who is the one who is travelling?' 'What am I going looking for?'

Do I really believe that going to a new restaurant is really going to improve my life?' It's going to put some food in my mouth for a short period of time and it's going to make a big hole in my wallet, but how will it improve my life? This impermanent experience is being cooked up in my head to make

me feel 'This is special!' – and then it's gone. When we look back in our lives we can see how many of these special moments have we already had – special holidays, special friends, special this, special that – and then they vanish.

## Dependent co-origination

This is the central point of looking at *pratityasamutpada*, dependent co-origination. The answer doesn't lie in the object; the object is not going to give you what you need. The object cannot complete you as a person because all object formations are impermanent and all subject formations are impermanent. All you get is a momentary configuration – a concatenation – a coming together of faculties and situations which generate a particular flavour.

I know people who travel all around Europe and America to play golf on different golf courses. Other people travel to different countries to look at birds or they want to see tigers so they visit tiger parks in India, or they go on some nature exploration in South Africa. That's fine, but having had that experience, what have you got...maybe some photos, some memories. In the Hollywood movies, in the old days the gunslinger would make notches on their guns for every person they killed, adding up a score or a tally, but what do you actually get ? The experience is gone and no experience, whether good or bad, can define who you are – unless you live entirely in the narrative.

When you meet people who have had a marvellous experience and who have woven it into their narrative and who want to invite you for an evening to see their three hour home-movie of their visit to South Africa – '.....and

this is us on the Thursday afternoon....by that time we were getting used to what was going on.....this is a really good bit now!' you think 'aagh where's the wine!' because somebody is 'in their story'. It was special for them for a while but now it's fading away. In that situation you can see the person's anxiety – 'How can I make it special again?' However looking at a movie of your holiday is not the same as being on holiday. The holiday's gone – it won't come back – you will never ever be in that place at that time with these people again. It's gone; what you had was an experience and the mementos you can bring from that are a new kind of experience. Watching a movie of your holiday doesn't take you back to the holiday, it is a new experience. This is like when you're a student and you don't have much money so you have to re-use your tea bags – by the third cup of tea, there's not much flavour in it. These kinds of events are like that – there's a bleeding away of the intensity with a sense of not being able to get that special experience in my ordinary life.

This takes us back to another of grannie's sayings: 'The best is the enemy of the good.' If you have a peak experience, the danger is that it pisses on the rest of your life, because it will never be that good again.

These attributions of special-ness are often very strongly connected with reification – the creation of the feeling-sense of real entities – and an objectification. When you look in terms of dependent co-origination you can see that the holiday arose due to circumstances; it was wonderful and it's gone. The thought 'It was so wonderful, I don't want it to go' is irrelevant.

That kind of thinking arises when we are imagining that we are in control of events. Dependent co-origination is helpful for settling us into the place of

the participant; we're not the boss, we're not the slave, we are participating in an evolving field. The quality of that participation will depend on the arising of what we call 'internal' factors such as memories and also on 'external' factors, the changes in what's going on around us. None of these can be stabilised.

This is a way of thinking you can adopt for yourself in any situation by asking *'What am I hoping to get from this situation?'* As long as we are hoping to get something we are likely to short-change ourselves. Actually, all you can get in any situation is the experience of being there. Then, it comes more back into the palm of your hand because *you can* determine how present you are when you're there.

If you go on the perfect holiday, when you get to your destination and find that the airline has lost your bag and you spend the first five days being in a terrible temper because you don't have your bag then it wasn't such a special holiday. You couldn't be on holiday because you were with the iniquities of that bloody company and why they did this, and 'the service is appalling' and 'I'm going to write a letter' and 'They don't care' and phoning, phoning .... this happens to people.

### Where are we now?

Where are we now? Now is the only time we have; we are time. Time is not a possession that we own but we ourselves are always in the very centre of each moment as it unfolds. This is all there is – being present in time, being 'here' – that is to say embodied in a context – and 'now' which means not going after past thoughts, not chasing after future thoughts, but just being present. That quality of presence is infinite. While the experience is always

changing and moving with the arising and passing of these seemingly internal and external factors – the subjective and the objective, or the inter-subjective – the experiencer doesn't change; this is the heart of the analysis.

There are many books you can read on this if it interests you but you can do it in a very simple way. When you go shopping the vegetables and fruit often have signs saying 'from New Zealand' or 'from South Africa' and this is amazing. When you look at an orange you can think of all the factors that have caused this orange to come from South Africa; what are the trade links, what is the history of that? You can carry out the analysis of that for yourself and you can see the links with all these complex chains of people – the people who work in air traffic control who allowed the cargo plane to arrive on time, the guys who drove the van who got up early in the morning and what that means to their marriage because they've got to be at the airport for three o'clock in the morning to get the cargo to take it to the market. This guy's wife is not very happy that he's getting up at three o'clock in the morning, because he's wanting to go to bed at six o'clock at night. She's saying 'We don't have any life any more', and he's saying 'but I want the job.' That's what you see – so many complexities of people's existence that are hovering around this orange. The orange is not a thing in itself; there are no things in themselves. There are no self-existing entities.

That's what we were looking at yesterday, in terms of 'there is no internally-defining essence in any phenomenon'. Once we see that, we realise that when we use language as a way of naming, essentially what we are doing is using a pair of cognitive scissors to cut out shapes in the world. When we look around in this room, what we actually see is colour and shape and even

the colour and shape are interpretive. What you *feel* you see is different people, but 'different people' is a cognition. We are identifying – 'that's a man' 'that's a woman,' 'that woman is small, that woman's tall, 'that man's like this', and so on and so forth. We are cutting out a shape and saying 'This is a unique, discreet person' and, in extrapolating them from the context, we apply particular forms of identification to them.

## The biased ego

So the control that the ego has in the world is basically a kind of violence, it's the violence of tearing asunder the integration of the non-dual field. That doesn't mean then when we talk to different people we don't find ourselves talking in different ways, but it's to see that these people are connected with everything else just as we are connected with everything else. So in any interaction complex lines of connection are moving yet we make a definite conclusion 'I find it easier to talk to John than to Bob because – I don't know – with Bob it's never quite right.' We have these little stories – 'this is what this person Paul is like, and this is what John's like, and this is what I'm like, therefore it's obvious that I would prefer talking to John than to Paul.' So 'this shape means this, and that shape means that' and when you get into that way of thinking it's possible to know which person to try to avoid...and then you are back to editing experience.

Dependent co-origination is saying 'Because you and John and Paul are all connected anyway, why are you making this bias? Why are you saying "This one's good and that one's bad"?' Dependent co-origination leads us to equanimity, being open to every situation.

If you are having a conversation with John and it's difficult, that's what you're having, that is your life at that moment. We say 'I don't want that' but life is not a restaurant – it is what it is. Why are we limiting ourselves by thinking 'this feels uncomfortable; I can't inhabit this.' Dependent co-origination, if you look at it again and again, shows that the limitation that I see in John is the reflection of a limitation in me.

It's as though we have two finite pieces, like two bits of Lego, and we are trying to hammer the bit that doesn't fit into the shape. Children do this with jigsaw puzzles and if we see them we say 'that's not the right bit' you've got to find the place where it fits. So we're having a certain kind of experience which may be bitter, sour, or sweet, or sharp – and *'It's not what I want!'* – but it is what it is.

All the schools of buddhism stress that if you can stay with 'It is what it is' and keep opening to that, you will find more contentment, more profound satisfaction than if you try to live life on your terms. There's a huge amount of energy wasted in trying to manipulate the world rather than shifting our own position.

Tibetans have a nice saying: *'It's easier to cover your own feet with leather than to try to cover the whole road'*. If you are trying to sort out other people and find the perfect moment it's not going to happen, but if you can put the leather round yourself, if you can wrap yourself in flexibility, tolerance, openness, then you can be with what's there. When we do that, the difficult experience is there for a while and then it goes.

So this is the way of taking up the analysis. It means to use your intelligence, to use your knowledge of the world, and keep examining *'What assumptions am I bringing into the situation?'*

Of course, as an analytic method it's quite slow; it requires you not to be so caught up in a situation, so it's a kind of preparation for proceeding. In the Tibetan tradition, that's a basis which is then taken into the tantric situation in which we make use of the various energies of the world; by harmonising with these energies we can have a more direct experience of openness.

### Everything is imagination

We're going to do a little bit of meditation just now and essentially we are going to be practicing using our imagination to dissolve the sense of dualistic separation between subject and object.

Now to imagine something, in our western tradition, is to be involved in a kind of fantasy because we say that there are these two categories – fantasy and reality – and if something is real it is not a fantasy, and if something is a fantasy it's not real. The buddhist tradition is not operating in these two categories at all because there is an understanding that our imagination is the creative capacity of the mind to enter into experience. So when we were looking at the example of the statue earlier each of us was imagining the statue.

Imagination means images and these images, which can appear external to us or as the images in our mind, are constructions – an image of a car... an image of your own children. You have an idea of your own children but other people meeting your children don't see them the way you see them; your

children exist in your imagination. You're thinking 'I see them every day, I give them a bath, I wash their clothes. They are not imagination. It's not a fantasy, that's the reality of my life!'

We have to be very clear here. The buddhist notion of imagination is not saying that it's a fantasy, it's saying that *everything* is imagination – everything is the creativity or the energy of the mind. It is according to the particular repertoire of contents in the mind and according to the freedom of expression – whether we are very habitual in the pattern-making which arises as our imagination or whether it can be more free and spontaneous – that we have different kinds of experiences in the world.

### Tantra- dissolving the separation

So, in the tradition, there are many different deities, each of whom has particular qualities and so on. We don't have the time just now to go into these details but we can work with their essence which is that: In the open spaciousness of the world, in the sky-like basis of existence, the pure forms arise; that is to say that a dynamic form arises out of emptiness or the basic un-formed nature. We would come to this conclusion through the analysis of dependent co-origination, but now we are taking it up as a kind of 'given' and in a symbolic way.

Imagine in front of you the infinite clear blue sky – a beautiful summer's day, not a cloud in sight, just infinite, infinite shining blue – and in the distance, just higher than the top of your head, is a ball of light. In the centre it is white in colour and around the surface are rainbow colours, red, blue, green, yellow and white – it's a cultural prejudice for Tibetans to imagine there's white light in a rainbow – and these lights are shimmering around the ball of

light. We imagine that this ball is the manifestation, or condensation, of the body, speech and mind of all the buddhas.

So, in this blue sky in front of us is the living presence of all the buddhas. Keep your eyes open or closed depending on what's easy for you – try it out. As we look at this ball of light we imagine that rays of light are coming from it. These rays of light come in to our forehead and purify all the substantial material sense of being embodied. They come in through our throat and purify all the reifying use of language that we have, all the rigidity of our verbal expressions. Then they come into the heart – the site of the mind in the tradition – and purify our over-reliance on thoughts, feelings, and sensations so that our body becomes filled up with light. Imagine it here just as white light; our body is now completely transparent and it's as if our skin is made of glass. So there is no solid substance anywhere inside our body and, as we are imagining this, we recite OM AH HUNG. OM is the expression of the buddha's body, AH of the buddha's speech, and HUNG of the buddha's mind. As we are making this representation, we are linking our energy with the body, speech and mind of the buddha. We do this for some time and then, when we stop the reciting, imagine this ball of light is coming to the top of our head and it descends through our head into our heart. The ball is made of light and our body is light, so then our body of light dissolves into the ball of light.

Now there is only one thing in existence – this ball of light – and it becomes smaller and smaller and smaller and then it vanishes. We just rest in that state of complete openness. Gradually, thoughts, feelings and sensations arise. Just give space to them; let them come and go as they are, with as

little interference as possible. Then we come back into the experience of being in the room together.

This is a very short practice but it contains the essence of all the different tantric practices, and there are thousands and thousands of them. If you would like to do more of this you are very free to do so. You can elaborate it slightly by imagining the face of the buddha or Padmasambhava on this ball of light. The key thing is to have faith. Faith is very important, because when we have faith we gather ourselves together into one place and we are really believing 'This is the place of all buddhas.' We're not thinking about it or imagining it's some kind of idea or fantasy, this is the actual presence 'Here they are, with me' and as we do the recitation, their nature, represented by the light and the sound of OM AH HUNG is becoming integrated into us. My nature is being transformed from my ordinary flesh and blood body with all my habitual preoccupations and so on. These are just being gently dissolved and dissolved until I am in this radiant body of light. All that I am hearing is the sound of OM AH HUNG. The mind is just completely open to the experience; I don't need to have thoughts about anything else.

You can see that tantric meditation evolved as a way of integrating spaciousness and energy, or movement and stillness; through the movement of the recitation and the visualisation, the mind has a dynamic focus. Because the mind is used to being involved in complexity, if you give it a stable focus like observing the breath or an external object, you have a discordancy between habitual tendency and meditation practice. In tantra, they take the very energy of our involvement in everyday life and transform it by moving it into a different mode.

Now we are being purified and our nature is inseparable from the buddha, and then the presence of all the buddhas comes in through the top of our head and down into our heart and we dissolve into that.

So we start with two things – me as an inadequate person and the buddha – and we are saying OM AH HUNG, OM AH HUNG, OM AH HUNG: 'Please purify me, make me the same as you.' That's a strong duality.

But then the presence of the buddha is in my heart, and my body which is made of light, now dissolves from the feet up and the head down into this ball of light; so two are going into one and there is just this integrated ball of light. The ball of light gets smaller and smaller and then vanishes into space. Now there is only space, or emptiness – the dharmakaya or dharmadhatu – the infinite dimension of being. In that state, if we are doing the practice strongly, for a moment, there is nothing, just open – nothing at all. Nothing at all, and yet we are present; so I am present in nothing, as nothing. In the Tibetan tradition this is called *rig-ton* or inseparable emptiness and awareness. Then, inside that state, gradually, experiences arise – memories, thoughts, sounds of birds from outside and so on and gradually, we become more aware of complex manifestations.

### The experience of infinite openness

The key aspect of the practice at this point is to stay with the experience of infinite openness. Infinite means, no limit; there is no limit at all to this openness so when a thought comes, where does it come from? It comes from the infinite openness. If something has no limit, how will you import something from outside into it? It's not possible because it has no limit and so, by definition, there is nothing outside it. When you really directly taste this experience you see that thoughts are arising in and from the empty dimension of being; the same is true for sensations. Ordinarily we think of a sensation 'oh, my knee is sore' and then we say 'oh, I'm back in my body.' Here, if there is a sensation just stay open...it is the energy or radiance of the

mind. It is the dharmakaya which gives rise to this experience of radiant, nuanced, immediate sensation; sensations, feelings, thoughts — this is the mind.

Then you think 'Ah, here is the room' but where is this room? Have I gone away on a holiday and then come back to the room...this would be the ordinary understanding. But the point of tantra is that, in seeing the infinite emptiness of the mind, we see that the room is in the mind. 'This room is experience; this is my experience' – and we stay big — infinite.

Awareness is infinite and inside it subject and object are ceaselessly moving. After a while, when we get up and have tea, have a pee and so on – where we are walking, what are we walking in the infinity of the mind. When we are talking, this is the sound of mantra and everything we see is the radiance of the formation.

This is the heart of all the tantric teachings and it's a very nice practice to do. Whenever we get lost in life, whenever we feel overwhelmed by stuff and it's all too much and we feel oppressed and very small, we can take five minutes and just do this practice and come back into the openness and everything is suddenly back in its place, its own size.

Everything is a dynamic movement in the mind, and if you stay open... sounds, colours, shapes, forms are arising and passing, arising and passing ...this is the radiance of the mind.

So, in this short practice you have your own mind as the dharmakaya, that is to say the buddha's mind, and arising from this you have the *sambhogakaya*. *Sambhoga* means enjoyment and *kaya* means mode, or

body, or aspect. It's the quality of being present with all experience without entering into judgement; in this way you can enjoy it all, it's an aesthetic experience.

Then from within the matrix of this aesthetic experience, we have the *nirmanakaya*, which is the expressive form. *Nirmana* means an expression or an emanation – something which comes out, like a spark from a fire. So, moment by moment, the body is moving – gestures, postures, speaking and so on and this is occurring within the field of experience; this is living non-duality. I am here in this room with you and i'm not inside myself, looking out at you from inside a private world, there is no private world.

The ground of everything is completely open, the field is what I belong in and I am the movement of the field, just as you are the movement of the field, and each of us is the centre of the field. So we don't have to control and conflict with other people, we can move, this is the integration of the three kayas.

So this is a way of understanding the illusory nature of the world .....

Generally speaking you would keep repeating OM AH HUNG until your body is full of light, it depends on how much time you have available. Sometimes you could do it for ten minutes sometimes half an hour sometimes just one minute but generally speaking you would do it until you had the sense that you had fully received this and that there was now a kind of equalisation. Because, at first, you can begin like a small lost child – you have all this power and I have nothing – then gradually you are bringing about the shift and then you go into the merging.

You will find in the Tibetan tradition that many many mantras have OM AH HUNG in them because they represent exactly the body speech and mind of all of the buddhas. Tibetans have a saying that om ah hung is the essence of all mantras. So if you know many many mantras but you don't have much time you can say om ah hung three times and all of your mantras are taken care of. These are called tricks of the trade!

## Dzogchen - the view

All the different vehicles, or ways of practicing, in Buddhism can be thought about in terms of four factors – view, meditation, activity and result. One of the reasons for giving a lot of explanations is to make sure that the view is clear because if you do the meditation practice without being clear about the view, then it's difficult to see where you might get lost in the meditation or start making mistakes.

Dzogchen is the third way of experiencing this illusory nature. In dzogchen the view is that, from the very beginning, our own nature has been completely pure. That is to say, all seeming defilements or confusions or errors exist in relation to our real nature, or our natural condition, in the same way as a reflections exist in a mirror. The reflection doesn't contaminate the mirror; it's not outside the mirror but neither does it merge completely into the mirror.

So say for example you have a tendency to be lazy and sometimes that annoys you and you think 'I don't want to be lazy. If I was not lazy I would be a better person and I would be able to make better use of my life.' That is a thought and one thought is linking into other thoughts and creating a kind of

package or schema. Who is having that thought? You are aware of the thought and the thought seems to have a 'light of its own'.

When you are at school, you are taught by the teacher to pay attention and really think about what's going on. When we talk about the European Enlightenment we have the idea that we're talking about 'the light of rational thought'. That this will be able to penetrate into some of the mysterious dark corners and dogmatic propositions, the remnants of the Middle Ages and religious dogma and so on, and that with the light of the clarity of the thoughtful mind, there will be a freedom of experience. That was the thinking of Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau and so on and it's very much the basis for what we think: that thought is illuminating.

From the dzogchen point of view, the illumination of the thought is like the illumination of the moon. The moon has no light of its own, it is the sun which gives the light. This light is caught by the moon and then reflected out so that we see, on a full moon night, this great ball in the sky. In some countries you can even read a book by the moonlight because it's very bright...so it looks as if the moon is the source of light, and then we realise that it's a relay station for the light of the sun.

In the same way the natural luminosity of the mind, or awareness or *rigpa*, is like the sun. It is this which illuminates the thoughts, feelings and sensations, which then seem to have a light of their own. When we are very caught up in the thoughts and feelings and sensations, the illuminating capacity and busyness sets off particular patterns and we get 'into something' 'onto something'. It's all very interesting and we seem to be getting somewhere, but in that very busyness we don't see the actual source of the illumination.

When we say that the mind 'has been pure from the very beginning', it means that no defilement has ever covered it up; defilements are actually aspects of the natural illumination which are taken to be self-existing.

For example, if I am lazy I think my laziness is getting in the way of my freshness or my commitment or my practice then it's an impediment, an obscuration, an obstacle. It stands between me and what I want to do, therefore I have to remove it. From the point of view of dzogchen... and it's a bit similar to what we were doing in the last practice...when we experience the natural openness of the mind, where is the factory creating these bad thoughts? Where is the production system for these limitations and obscurations? If the ground is infinite there is no other source than the ground itself. Therefore, if you stay with what seems to be a limitation, you will see that it vanishes. It is a self-liberating, energetic manifestation of the ground.

From the dualistic position, when I'm thinking about myself, when I'm standing in relation to myself, and saying '*James, you have a problem with this.*' I am speaking to myself about an aspect of myself, so there is a complete triangulation. The one who is speaking: '*I have to say this is a fact of my existence; I have to own up to it. I have a problem with laziness.*' seems to be very honest, very clear and speaking the truth. Why would I say this about myself if it wasn't true? Wouldn't I be more likely to say '*I am a wonderful person*' rather than '*I am lazy*'?

So I am heartfelt and honest, I don't feel any impediment in making my confession and I feel quite open –'it's a fact.' There is a felt sense of a root clarity in that but from the dzogchen point of view this is a pseudo-

illumination – it's actually the light of the ego. It seems bright but, as with the moon, whose brightness is it?

The thought *'I have a problem with laziness'* arises in the mind and then another thought comes *'Oh, it's Monday morning tomorrow. I have to make sure to put these bits of paper in my bag before I go to work.'* In that moment I am being quite efficient in my planning and I'm not being lazy. Where has laziness gone – and where has the one who recognises the laziness gone? It has vanished because *'I know that I am lazy'* is a group formation – it's a gestalt. Different pieces have come together and made a pattern which seems convincing, which seems to be true, which seems to have intrinsic value, and then it's gone, and now 'I' am into something else.

As we looked yesterday, it is the very openness or lack of inherent content in the first person singular that allows it to carry out its function. It is because 'I' as a signifier is empty that it can be used to signify everything.

This is a watch; if we were children we could imagine it's a big bird – whoosh, whoosh – but if we are adults we are not allowed to do that kind of thing. We can imagine things about anything, but usually not very much because once you've nailed this label of 'watch' onto the object it's a kind of 'done deal'. Everything falls into place and 'it is what I say it is'. What is it?...it's a watch! So you get a sort of solipsistic little sealed definition.

As long as we've got it defined in that way, there is a restriction on movement. The first person singular, 'I', is not like that because 'I' has no inherent content. You can't say *'I am something'* and keep saying it and saying it – if you do that, then you will end up in a mental hospital. If you say 'I am Jesus Christ. I am Jesus Christ. I am Jesus Christ.. I AM JESUS

CHRIST!', after a while people will say 'Hmm, I know it's Sunday – not the best time to arrange an admission – but we're going to do that'. This is very interesting in relation to everything else we've been talking about because it's very odd if somebody says the same thing again and again. Sometimes kids do that; they're in the back of the car on a long journey and they get into saying something like 'I'm a spaceman, I'm a spaceman, I'm a spaceman.'... 'Shudd-up!' but, generally speaking, we human beings keep re-defining ourselves.

### My self is undefinable

If you meet someone in a café to have a chat, they're going to tell you different things. If they are telling you a hundred and one versions of the same thing, you say 'You've already told me about that' because we want change and variety. That is a two-edged point, isn't it? That's sort of like Janus, it's facing in two directions. The more stories we tell, the more we can be wound into a never-ending revelation of something, because we never get to the bottom of who we are. Alternatively we can catch it in the moment – 'Oh, I am able to say all these different things about myself because 'myself' is not a definable thing.' So, when I say 'I', who is the one who says 'I'? What is this 'I'? That is the door – sometimes it looks like a very small door and sometimes it looks like a completely always open door – into the natural condition: the mind is a radiant awareness or presence, a presence devoid of inherent content and therefore the host, the sphere of hospitality, of all experiences.

The very emptiness of my mind allows me to be everything that I have ever been, and allows all the possibilities of samsara and nirvana. In the book

*Simply Being*, there are many descriptions of this translated from the traditional Tibetan text. In seeing this and relating it to ourselves in the meditation, we start to see that all the points where we snarl up, where we turn in on ourselves, where we become convoluted and knotted – against ourselves, or over-excited and a bit manic – whenever we 'get into something' or 'on about something' and we're carried hither and thither – these are all movements within the sphere of the mind.

Whatever we say about ourselves is both true and a lie. In a while, it will be lunchtime, so it will be reasonable to say 'I am hungry'. If you have some lunch and then somebody offers you some food, you say 'I'm not hungry.' And they say 'But at twelve o'clock you told me you were hungry, so I've gone to the shop and I've got you some food and you should eat it. It's only polite!' You say 'But I'm not hungry now.' 'Oh, so you were hungry then and you're not hungry now! What kind of a person are you – lying and cheating, misleading me!'

Everything we say is true situationally, in a particular context, according to the dependent co-originations. Many factors create the situations 'I'm hungry' 'I'm thirsty' 'I'm happy' 'I'm sleepy' 'I'm excited' 'I'm bored.' As each arises, it is situationally important and you might choose to voice it and work with it, and then it's gone!

## Together as it is

Bringing these things together we have the natural openness of the mind – the immediate, spontaneous presence in the field of experience, a field of experience which has never been cut; there is no splitting, no tear inside this. Within this there are ceaseless movements of diversification. This means that

statements like 'I'm hungry' 'I'm tired' and so on are expressing momentary manifestation in a situation grounded in emptiness. So emptiness has a field within which unique, specific gestures are occurring all the time.

The integration of these three aspects of our being is the understanding of dzogchen. When we are caught up in the specific manifestations, in how we are in the moment, and when we try to solve that manifestation by applying the antidote of other manifestations, life tumbles on and we have the ceaseless busyness of endlessly trying to correct ourselves.

So if you have a mountain bike and you go out in the Peak District, because the ground is rough, you are having to adjust your balance in a very dynamic way, moment by moment. That is an activity; if you don't keep adjusting your balance, you're going to fall over; you have to be balanced to keep going. This is the work of the ego, it's always trying to rectify the tilts which are brought about by circumstances to make it OK. We do that in our own particular ways. Some people are very placatory as a way of trying to lower the danger from an aggressive 'others', others are very emollient – they try to make everything sweet. Other people become aggressively dominating and controlling but these are all moves to try to stabilise the imbalances which occur in the field of manifestation, just because it's turbulent. It's always turbulent.

From the point of view of dzogchen, this is not to see the real problem because, as long as you only are attending to manifestation, everything that happens is very real and it's kind of banging into you...'*Not another thing! Oh, I've had enough!*' We get overwhelmed and filled up with stuff and, of course, in that situation we become impulsive.

In the British prison system there are a fair percentage of people, but I'm sure it's less than half, who have committed clearly intentional crimes. Many others are there because of impulsivity and as we know, especially in women's prisons, there are very high degrees of mental distress that was present before these unfortunates went into prison. So that force of being filled up and over-connected with the world, and becoming hyper-sensitive to what other people do – the feeling that you have to stand up for yourself and defend yourself. That fragile ego skin is a great source of getting into trouble, it's found in all the so-called personality disorders. That's a very unfortunate and unnecessary movement in samsara.

### Attending to immediacy

From the point of view of dzogchen, what is missing is the integration in the natural openness of being. Being here means just presence as aware potential. The awareness is awareness of the openness, it's just 'oh'...and within that, there is always the potential. There's the potential of the situation and the potential of our qualities – patterns which are ceaselessly manifesting. The Tibetan word for that is *lhun drub* which means instantly formed, or all of a piece; so the world is arising all of a piece.

When we turn and look out of the window, we see bits of the cars, bits of the building and so on. We don't build it up one piece at a time as if we were doing a painting; it arises all at once. We wake up in the morning and everything is there, all at once – that's the thing to attend to, the immediacy of experience. Then, by being present in the immediacy, what you are called upon to do will appear.

If you have to be with other people – if you are a teacher, a parent or work in a shop – how will you speak to different customers, to different children? It helps if you see the child you are going to speak to. The child will show how they are, and having seen what they have shown, we respond to that. That's not very difficult, but if you have an agenda in your head about how a child should be, and if you have already formulated a reading of how that child is, in your interaction with the child you are going to introduce your pre-formed interpretation, and that will be a violence to the child in this moment. It's not that the idea in your head about the child is necessarily wrong as an overall account of the average behaviour of the child, but in this particular moment, what is the state of the child?

From the dzogchen point of view you're only really going to be able to know that if you are fully present. This means you are in your belly so you have a kind of feel of the person, you are in your heart so you are open to the person, you are in your senses so you are seeing how they are, and that gives you the richest possible account of how that person is. Then, because you are present, you have access to the widest domain of your own repertoire of responses – and so their being and your being arise together. That's the non-dual co-emergence, which is the ceaseless unfolding of our being together in the world with others.

So these are the three factors: openness, the aesthetic immediacy, and the gestures which occur within that on an ongoing basis. For example – an example I think I've used many times when I've been here in Macclesfield – when I travel on the underground in London, I see people with their feet on the seats. When I was a child, someone would have said 'Take your feet off

the seat.' They wouldn't have had to say 'Look, there's a notice on the window.' they'd just say 'Take your feet off the seat', and the other person would say 'I'm sorry'. Nowadays, in London, what is the permission to say that? In my head I may want to say 'Hey, please take your feet off the seat' but my belly is telling me the social contract that gives permission to say that is asunder, it's gone – kaput!

That's why we have to *be* through these different aspects of ourselves, because if we're not in communication with all these levels of information and we shoot out from some limited position in ourself or self-state, the message that whacks out on to the world is likely to cause a disruption; it's not going to be a smooth arrival.

So, relaxed and open, present to the entire field, which is not based on cognitive processing – it doesn't mean we've got some rapid computer that's analysing all the data – it's just the immediate receptivity that shows us what's there and then the gestures arise. The interesting thing about that gesture is that you don't have to think about it, and it's okay, because you're 'in time'. Openness is always present in time 'as it is' because time is just this 'open, open, open' and the immediate arising of everything is within the openness.

If you are connected and you speak, you connect; it's just like that. Generally speaking, the more we practice this, the less we bump into other people. The right words will come out of your mouth because you are there, and that's a marvellous thing. Certainly, working in the sphere of therapy, sometimes with groups, families, couples, individuals, again and again what I can see is that people are out of time. And because they are out of time, they're out of rhythm with the people they're connected with and so they bang into them. They spend time 'in themselves' either in making over-elaborate formulations of what they want to say and how they want to be –

which is just mis-matching where the other person is, or it all comes out in a sudden blurb or impulsive gesture and again it misses the other person. They have been in their own time, the time of their memories, cooking it over and over again: 'Well last time we met you said....and I want to tell you and...' 'Okay, you are saying that last time I didn't listen to you but when I've come in from work and I'm tired and you're bending my ear, you are not seeing me' and it just goes on and on.

This is because we're into the future – planning, hopes – what do we need to do? Anxiously trying to control what hasn't yet come, or caught up in the past – 'It's not fair! Why did you say that? I thought we were going to do this, and now we're doing that! You should have told me. I don't think that's very good' and so on, cooking, cooking, cooking... When you get that tight formulation it's got such a shape of its own...where are you going to find a shape in the world that that shape will exactly fit into? It's highly unlikely that you will, so you try to ram it into the other person and of course they think 'Whoah' and you say 'You see again! You never listen to me! You never listen to me!' Well, who would want to listen to that? It just goes on and on and that's the tragedy of samsara. It's not that people are bad, it's that we are all off balance and we can't find that central point.

It's like if you were learning something like Alexander Technique where you imagine a string coming from the top of your head – you have the sense of feeling straight but if you look in the mirror you're off balance; you can't trust your feelings. That's very important to know because feelings, sensations and thoughts are, as it were, inside us they feel very, very intimate. So if I can't trust my feelings and thoughts, what will I rely on? Relying on other people is a bit scary, especially if you've had some difficulties in your life 'once bitten, twice shy'. Maybe I'm going to trust myself...but I can see I'm not very reliable...but I don't trust you – that's not a very nice place to be.

So what can I trust, what can I take refuge in? – The mind itself...mind as an awareness free of content.

## Relying on emptiness

We're not relying on our unreliable thoughts, feelings and sensations. We are relaxing into the openness of the immediate awareness. That is always reliable because it doesn't have anything inside it. Emptiness won't let you down. That's quite strong.

Stuff lets us down because it could be the wrong stuff; having the right stuff at the right time is quite difficult. Where there's building construction going on there are huge logistics departments, incredible programmes for bringing in the right people and equipment at the right time...'When do you need the plasterers, when do you need the joiners, and this and that ...' because all these jobs have to be dovetailed.

In the second world war that kind of analysis for developing the ways in which the somewhat hostile allies could collaborate together gave rise to modern systems theory: where we look at organisational systems or family systems and see how complex interactions can be managed in a way that has minimal friction and optimal synergy. Part of that is to realise that all systems operate in space – these are movements in space – and therefore a shared sense of space has to occur.

## The theatre of existence

The way that works in therapy is that you remind people in a family that they are not the only person in the family, that other people exist. In the old-fashioned Milan school you would say to a child 'I'd like to introduce you

someone; I don't think you've met them before...this is your father. What your father needs to say to you now is 'This is your bed time and this is what you have to do.' I'd now like to introduce you to another person you haven't met...this is your mother. One thing I have to tell you, as a child, is that your mother is not called 'Jean'. Your mother is called 'Mother' and every time you call her 'Jean' you're lost. If you call this woman 'Mother' life will start to make more sense. Now you have a Mum and a Dad, that's pretty good '

That's really important because then the system can start to operate. There's a mum and a dad and there's kids, and the kids know they are kids because there's a mum and a dad. But, if you call your parents 'John' and 'Jean', it's quite difficult because the roles start to collapse.

The key thing about this is that what's being rectified is the 'proper working of a theatre.' The stage is the emptiness of the potential of the environment that they share, and within that these characters, in role, can now start to elaborate the play of the family – probably not a 'happy family' but, because each person has a role, at least it's family that might survive; without roles that it's more difficult.

That's an ordinary example to illustrate how, for the theatre to be established, you need both an empty stage and for people to be 'in role'. Now, can we allow the situation to determine our role? This links back to the general buddhist notion of the bodhisattva vow – 'In this and all my future lives, may I benefit sentient beings.'

## Benefitting beings

How do we benefit sentient beings? You can do it as a Sergeant Major and tell them what to do; you could have a super-ego function – 'I am enlightened, I know the truth, so you should do what I say' – but in the western world that probably wouldn't be very successful. The alternative would be to do it through an attunement: by getting close to the actual lived structure of the other and finding a way of meeting and then working together. In order to do that, you have to allow the person to be there as they are, and you have to allow yourself to be malleable – 'They can be fixed; I will unfix myself in order to find a fit.' But we think 'Why should I? It's not fair. It's not up to me.' That's what makes it difficult, isn't it? That's the ego-resistance.

In the world of therapy there are many stories of attunement, particularly with people who have severe handicaps. Sometimes they spend all day rocking, and then the therapist comes in and decides to start rocking with the person. After a while, the rocking changes and the person starts to come into some gestural conversation and that can lead into a movement into language; there are many beautiful stories like that.

It's much easier to do that as a therapist because you have permission, but if you are in complex family dynamics or you have difficulties at work, finding a way of moving yourself to make the fit with the other is often like pulling a rubber band – you make your gesture but at a certain point you think 'Why am I off-balance?' *Twang!* 'These people! I don't know why I bother.' That's the difficulty, isn't it? We think we're being generous, but actually we've got the meter running; we are calculating the cost to ourselves. That happens because we have a home base – 'I know who I am, I know what I need, I know what I'm like. This is me.'

The more we have defined ourselves as a person, the more individuated we are, the more 'authentically' ourselves we are then, on one level, the more freedom we have. But consequently, on another level, we have a great deal of limitation because we become hyper-sensitive to being pulled out of the position that we have taken up.

I remember many years ago working with a lady who had started a therapy centre in London. She was a very powerful lady – able to make many things happen – but quite controlling. One day she came to the conclusion 'I have been shamed enough in my life. I will never let anyone shame me again.' as a result of which she behaved shamefully for many years. Anytime anyone tried to say 'What are you up to?' her interpretation was 'Don't you try to tell me who I am. Don't you shame me. I can be who I want to be.' and that's not very successful.

## Finding a fit

From the point of view of dzogchen, we are being invited all the time to become malleable, flexible, adaptive. What is it that gets in the way of that? – our resistance. What is the resistance based on? – an over-determined sense of who we are. *Fitting* is actually the basis of workability; if things don't fit together, how could they operate together? – without that they're going to crash into each other.

So how do we find a fit? How much adaptation do I expect other people to make if I'm going to make my adaptation to fit them? Maybe if you do fifty percent, I'll do fifty percent – that's fair!' If the other person only does ten percent and I do ninety percent, maybe I'm a mug. Maybe I'm being in some kind of collusion with their need to be in control and to turn other people into their servant. Maybe...but if that is the limit of their existence at the moment, if you make it as a heartfelt gift to them you won't be in collusion because you'll know what you're doing. We're only in collusion when we're sucked into someone else's positioning.

From the point of view of dzogchen, we can go out of our way to be helpful to other people if that seems the right thing, if it's the right time and so on. Flexibility is okay if you can re-balance in each place you go to.

For example, a couple of times in this brief time we've had here we've done this focussing on the breath or simple external object. We decide 'I'm going to focus on the breath' but now my mind is wandering off; I recognise that has happened so I'm going to bring my mind back. I know where I should be so when my mind goes off after something else, this is an error. If I bring myself back *I am now where I should be.* Having a sense of where you should be is quite important in terms of the ego's domain because we can then work out where we stand in relation to the other people.

## The aurora of awareness

When the sun comes up you immediately get strong illumination and shadow, and when the sun is over the horizon you can see that the light is coming from the sun. However when the light first starts to come up in the morning – you usually see this more in a cloudless warm environment – before the sun has risen you have this blessing of aurora, a diffuse light that spreads through the world. It's as if everything has a very soft illumination which is pervasive; the light is everywhere but doesn't yet have a clearly defined source. This image is used as an to indicate how awareness, like space, is everywhere.

So when we are sitting meditating, thoughts are arising. If you find yourself caught up in a thought, it links with some other thoughts and it takes you *here*, then you think 'now I'm *here* so where do I have to go to in order to get back to where I am? – Here – or here? But the mind is everywhere; wherever you are, you are in the natural openness of the mind. If you taste that, you'll never get lost.

In our ordinary life we get caught up in stuff. Maybe we get a bit depressed and worried about things, fearful about getting older or whatever it would be, and our mind starts turning around in that. Maybe we think 'I've been studying Buddhism, I shouldn't be like that, I should be another kind of person. I need to take myself out of this and put myself in a better place.' From the point of view of dzogchen, the question is '*Where are you in your depression, in your anxiety?*' '*Where is that?*' '*Who is the one who is feeling the depression?*'...this is the open awareness of the mind. So if you just stay present *with* whatever is occurring, in that very place itself is natural freedom. However if you imagine that there's a better place to be you will give up

natural or intrinsic freedom by going in search of a constructed freedom – your conceptual notion of where a better place would be.

## The unmarked mirror

In the midst of depression, there is space. If you get into a tumble of thoughts arising from anxiety, worry, confusion, self-hatred, self-doubt – 'I hate myself, I always get it wrong, I don't know, I feel so embarrassed, I don't want to go back there' you can check for yourself: what aspect of this is the sun and what is the moon? Because the bit of you which is saying 'I can't bear it, I feel so stupid, I wish I hadn't done that', 'I see myself and I'm useless' – seems to be a clarity but it is the moon. So where is the sun? The sun is open, relaxed, thinking 'If this is the kind of theatre you want, enjoy it. I don't mind. I have no particular agenda. I've no favourite film. If you want to play that again and again – enjoy it!'

That's awareness – just like the mirror. The mirror doesn't mind; the mirror doesn't care because the mirror doesn't get scratched or marked or involved. The one who gets marked and involved is the movement of the energy of ourself – so a thought is being impacted by another thought. Thoughts operate in the same domain and so they crash into each other, or like adjectives and adverbs they qualify and modify each other, interacting and weaving patterns. Awareness itself is unscratchable, indestructible – it's called *vajra* or *dorje*; it doesn't get cut up, it doesn't get improved, you can't lose it and you can't find it. This is the essential difference, and if you see that, then who's giving you a bad time? – a thought. Who is the you who is getting a bad thought?' – a thought. So a thought is beating up a thought! Both of you, go to the headmaster's study at once! but you can't catch the thoughts, they are already gone...it was an illusion.

If you are inside the illusion, if you are trapped in it and if you take it as strongly real, it will be very unpleasant for you because when you are in it, so that's all there is, that's the totality of your world. A finite experience has come to appear total and almost infinite, but actually, the finite experience is always within the infinity of openness. Thoughts keep embellishing each other, ceaselessly elaborating, but the domain that that's operating in is always simple and open. This might sound like a lot of theory but it's really in the practice; and it's to trust experience not thoughts.

So for a final time, we'll do this three 'A' practice. Just sit in a relaxed way, opening our gaze into the space, imagining there's a letter 'A' which represents the open mind of all the buddhas, and we make the sound of 'A' three times, opening ourselves into that space.

If you trust this, if you give yourself into that practice, then that opening is what is occurring. We are also very likely to have a little meta-commentary running on top, because the ego is like a dog that likes to piss on every lamp post. Every kind of experience you have, the ego is making some little comment, saying 'I've got something to say. I'm in charge here.' That's the key choice: if you listen to that spiralling narrative you triangulate the experience and then you are caught up in the commentary telling you about what is going on, and you never really fully enter into it. You have to give yourself into it in the same way you give yourself into dancing or kissing. Just – you're in it. If you do that, then it's open – then a thought comes and that's the vital crossroads.

If I go into the thought, the thought will tell me about the experience and I will be exiled from the experience. If I stay open, the thought will arise and pass through the space and then another thought and a sensation and a feeling and so on. This is the crossroads we come back to again and again when we do the practice. Staying open and letting the mind tumble, like a river tumbling down the mountainside, let the mind tumble whichever way it likes. Whatever is arising, just give it space, it won't cause any harm. If you try to edit it or witness it, observe it, judge it, make a commentary on it you will find yourself back in the dualistic split off section of the ego. So the work is to re-balance ourselves by integrating in space – which is the ground of integrating all phenomena.

## Practicing opening

It's only really through doing the practice again and again that it starts to show itself to you. At first, we are doing it as a kind of covering, another kind of clothing that we wrap around ourselves, but gradually it starts to permeate into us and becomes just part of the natural unfolding of our existence. Then we have the real benefit, because it's in our finger tips; it's with us in every situation we encounter. So, do as much regular practice as

you can. You can do that third practice for short periods of time – at a break at work you can just do a little – and then you're back, with more expansion.

The first thing we were doing this morning, the analysis, is very helpful. If you are sitting in a meeting at work and people are talking nonsense, it's very interesting to analyse all the various sources of the nonsense they talk. You can see the constructed nature of these worlds which, otherwise, would be oppressive, boring, or otherwise destructive.

All of these dharma methods are ways of finding paths through the world; not being blocked, not being turned in on yourself so that you feel oppressed – but actually seeing that there are ways to understand what's going on. Due to these traditions coming from the buddha's kindness, there are many ways of remaining loose, open, flexible, responsive. It's a great blessing.